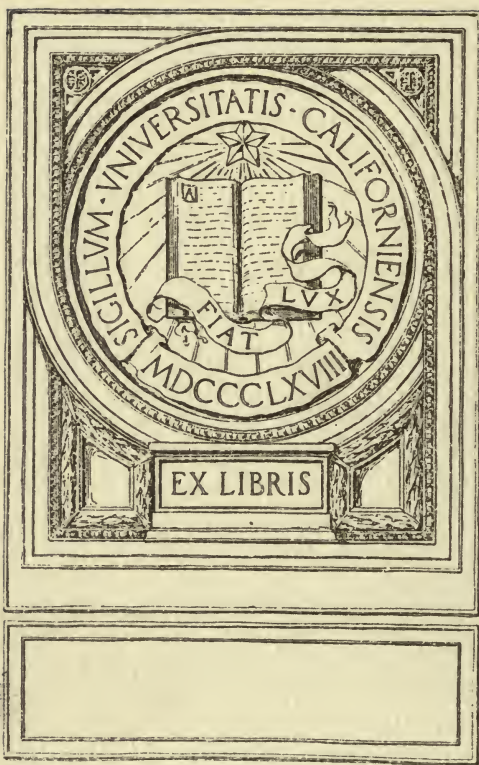


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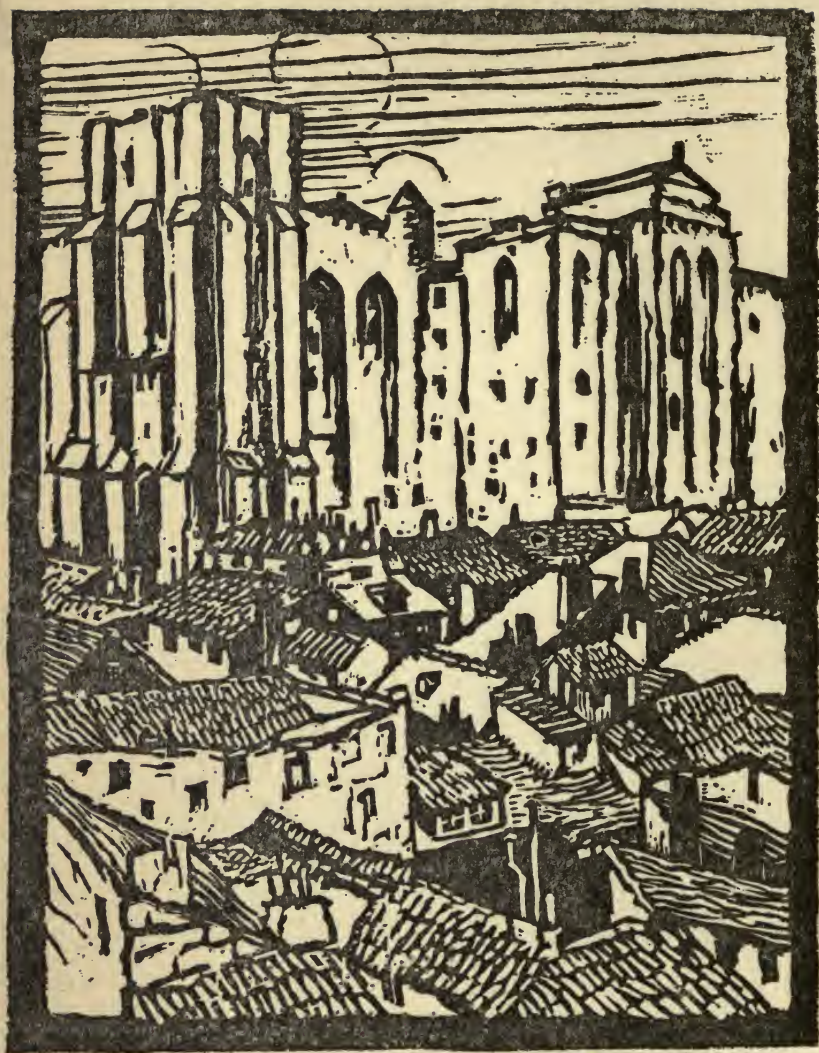




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AMONG FRENCH FOLK

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Harold Haven Brown

CHATEAU DES PAPES, AVIGNON

From a wood-block by Harold Haven Brown

AMONG FRENCH FOLK

A BOOK FOR VAGABONDS

By
W. BRANCH JOHNSON

*" O why do you walk through the fields in gloves
Missing so much and so much ? "*

FRANCES CORNFORD

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AMONG FRENCH FOLK

I

THE BEGGAR OF THE PALACE

I

SPRING is surely the most abused of seasons, for to it are attributed, directly or indirectly, countless lapses from commonsense. I am instructed by Helen—a wife whose advice is often worth following—to blame the season for the notes which follow. Personally I would blame the employers who, just at that time, took it into their heads to dispense with my services. Had it not been for them I should have spent the summer respectably employed in filling the columns of a daily newspaper.

But no. Helen remains adamant on the Spring theory. She is romantic. Her only sorrow, I believe, is that she is not her namesake of Troy, whose beauty inspired poets and embroiled nations. That would have been *so* exciting. She found it exciting even to be out of a job. She looked up with dancing eyes.

"We'll wander through France," she enthused. "Just a pack on our backs and a Springtime smile for everyone we see."

I have yet to meet the person who will stand out against Helen. She listens to no reasoning: did not on this occasion. It was the Spring, she repeated, the season of the Bohemian, the Wanderlust. The Fates favoured her plan.

So, on a Spring night we found ourselves in Paris

and, strolling beside the Seine, watched in the darkness a Parisian declaration.

"*Mais c'est vrai que tu m'aimes ?*" There was anxiety in his voice—a tremolo which could be felt passionately in spite of the low tone in which the question was put.

A moment's silence followed, but it seemed like an age. All Paris stood still in expectation. Helen's hand sought mine in the darkness and trembled. So much happiness rested on the answer.

"*Bien sûr.*" The reply was as demure as you please; and there was an answering flash to the dark flowing river in the girl's eyes.

"*Alors . . .*" He was about to demonstrate his affection, when a great cat, as black as a piece of coal, emerged from the other half of Paris on to the parapet over the river, and looking directly at the couple, sat down in front of them and licked its chops. Helen was sure it winked, but I cannot vouch for that.

At any rate, the thread was broken. The girl laughed and enticed pussy on her lap, where she fondled it to the utter exclusion of her wooer, while he, poor fellow, sat meekly trying to ingratiate himself with both parties.

Did ever a black cat make so inauspicious an appearance? Or was it following the prescribed right of its species to bring luck? Or was it simply the Spring?

Only after long months did we chance upon the sequel.

II

THERE are people who have the knack of fitting into their surroundings—the grande dame in her drawing-room, the colonel at the head of his troops, the old beggar outside the Palace of the Popes at

Avignon. To both of us he will remain a living personality long after the splendour of the Popes has been relegated to the limbo of things forgotten. We turned a corner and he appeared by magic ; and at once the huge empty shell of a building by whose side he stood became alive and breathing. He was its history incarnate.

"Look !" exclaimed Helen rapturously.

In the more fortunate days of the Middle Ages when men could see the Kingdom of God in stones and the Spirit of God in mankind, some monastic painter would have snapped him up for a model of John the Baptist, and have turned out a truer portrait than all the historical reconstructions put together. He would have emphasised, ever so slightly, the thick iron-grey hair and unkempt beard, the lean drooping moustache, the wrinkled broad forehead and deep alert eyes of his subject. Over the ragged clothes and patched boots, through which a toe protruded here and there, he would have bestowed elaborate care : and there would have been a hint of dignity in the carriage of the figure, albeit the shoulders stooped and the knees were bent.

Helen, noting all this, seized my hand ecstatically.

"Perhaps he's a king or a prince in disguise," she whispered. She has a hankering after Bohemian royalty, has Helen.

"And will change at night into a handsome young man to wake the Princess out of her enchanted sleep."

"Into which she has been put by a wicked fairy, who dwells in the caverns of the mountains over there," she romanced, pointing towards the Alps.

"Where does the prince go to find her ?"

"To a hotel in the Rue de la République," I suggested, "where she sleeps so soundly that not even the café orchestras or the trams can wake her. Lucky princess !"

Helen pouted at this and was about to walk away, but I stopped her.

"Suppose the old beggar-man with the face of a saint were the spirit of one of the early Popes doing penance for the sins of his successors? The early Popes, you know, were poor men, and it was after they became powerful and rich that their influence declined."

"And so he stops outside this palace—which is more like a fortress than a palace—" commented Helen, "and begs not for alms, but for the forgiveness of all who pass by."

"What a punishment!"

"He has been here for centuries and will be here for still more centuries, because he has to ask forgiveness of so many injured people."

"Gently, gently," I put in at a moment when Helen's fertile imagination appeared to be slackening. "After all, the sin of the Papacy was the sin of all the rest of us; you can't put on to its shoulders everything that's wrong with the world."

"No," assented Helen. "If you go round kings' palaces you will find their spirits, too, begging for mercy. It's just greed I was meaning—greed of power and money."

"At any rate," I continued, indicating the beggar, "that poor chap looks like being here to all eternity. Nobody takes any notice of him."

"Do you expect them to?" asked Helen, with a little toss of the head. "You've even forgotten what century you're living in."

"Perhaps he isn't a Pope after all," I said, "nor a prince nor a king nor anything of that sort. Perhaps he's just a beggar."

"Let's come and ask him." Helen made a bee-line approach.

"*Pierre Gérin à votre service, Madame,*" I heard him say. You know the noise that frogs make at

night when they croak their message to the stars ? His voice was like that.

"Why do you beg for alms here ?" asked Helen in that direct manner of hers, which I have known frighten old maiden ladies out of their wits.

"Why not ? I feel myself a part of the old building."

"Then you are a Pope after all !" Helen clapped her hands with delight.

"*Moi un Pape, par exemple !*" The old man croaked loudly, and shook his mane at the joke. "But no, Madame. When I was young—that would be . . . well, it would frighten you to know how long ago that was—I served my term in the Army in this palace. It was a barracks then."

"A fine place to be stationed in," I suggested.

"It is better than Algeria," he replied, "but otherwise . . . ;" he shrugged his shoulders as if to say that all places are much of a muchness when one is in the Army. "I was young, and nothing mattered except to enjoy myself. *Il y avait des belles filles ici, M'sieu, vous comprenez.* Now, when I am a squeezed lemon, I do not care to move. I shall stay here and die in a ditch. Avignon belongs to me and I to it."

"You must have many memories of the palace to think over as you stand here day after day." Helen's voice was filled with sympathy.

"Yes, but these blank walls . . . they frighten me still. They used to frighten me when I was stationed here—they were so very white and so very blank. They were more like a prison than the prison itself—and I know what I am talking about. *Dame, oui.* I used to dream about them, and even when I was on furlough they used to follow me to my home. One day I could stand it no longer. I ran away—deserted—hid my uniform in a ditch, and stole other clothes. For a few days I was a

free man ; then I was brought back—first to this prison, then to the other. It was a relief to be moved, this the first of many visits.”

Helen’s eyes beamed approval. The ribbon of the Croix de Guerre on his breast would by comparison have left her cold.

“ You can imagine the rest of the story ; there was nothing else left for a jail-bird. At one time I grew rich on thefts—I could keep myself without begging in addition.”

“ Did it ever occur to you to work honestly ? ” asked Helen.

“ That I forget. And, anyhow, it is too late now. It is easier to mumble prayers and more profitable ” (“ with the women, you know,” he added to me in an aside). “ And one can think in between whiles.”

“ Of what ? ” I asked.

The old scallywag’s eyes twinkled.

“ Of the thefts one might have committed,” he said.

Helen glanced at me.

“ Did I not say he was the epitome of the Palace ? ” she asked.

But we should not have believed, had anyone told us, that we were to give him opportunity for further thought.

II

ÉTIENNE

I

THIS is to introduce the family Pépino of the Boulangerie du Jésus.

There was Hippolyte, the father, who used to bake his bread to the accompaniment of ribald choruses sung *sotto voce*, Zénobie, his buxom wife, Stéphanie, assistant to a fashionable milliner, André, the *externe* at the Lycée, on whom the family hope centred, and Michel, aged about three. One might add also Mattieu Marc Luc Jean, the most venerable creature of the establishment, a cat.

This Biblical appellation had been flippantly bestowed upon the beast by Madame Pépino on the very day when it had first strayed into the little bakehouse, its one eye cocked, its mangy tail quivering with emotion, and had refused to budge. There was something so respectful in its appearance, she said, and it reposed such trust in the charity of the Boulangerie du Jésus that she could not help giving it a nice name. It usually, however, answered to Escroc, which being interpreted, means rogue or swindler.

It was, in some ways, the tie which bound all members of the Pépino family together. Hippolyte, who resembled a cherub with a drooping moustache, used to "shoo" it away on the slightest provocation; it always made him feel, he complained, as if he ought to confess to it, and he could not think

what excuse he would give to M. le Curé if one day he were to fall into the temptation ; Satan took many strange forms. Whereupon Stéphanie's eyes would moisten as she scolded her father for saying such wicked things about the creatures of the *bon Dieu*. André looked up from his lessons to take his father's part against Stéphanie, but not against the cat, and Michel, with little theology, but a sure instinct for comfort, nestled meanwhile against Escroc and went warmly to sleep. The triangular wrangle would continue in a bantering spirit for some time, when enter Madame :

" *Allons, mes enfants, la soupe est servie.*"

One needed good hot soup at the Boulangerie du Jésus, for it was situated in a part of Nice where the sun and Society seldom penetrate—in the crowded quarter at the foot of the Castle rock. Sometimes at midday a long straight shaft of light gleamed down on to the pavement for a few minutes, but the height of the houses soon shut it out again, and it was only the narrowness of the unhealthy alley that made it retain any warmth. Yet in the evenings, when one could stroll along the Promenade des Anglais in comfort, it was chilly in these stone-built byways. One felt it specially when work drove one abroad in the midday sun, to return hither at night. Hot soup made the good blood flow again ; so said Stéphanie when she came back tired from the milliner's in the Avenue de la Victoire.

" These places are as cold as *les hivernantes*," she said one day as she entered the warmer bakery. " They seldom reach much above freezing point."

As the season passed, however, the custom of hot evening soup slackened. Pépino's bakehouse alone made more than a slight difference to the temperature : soon we passed evenings sitting in the roadway chatting casually with acquaintances

at opposite windows or further along the street, while Hippolyte, his brow covered with honest sweat, rushed out occasionally to give us the benefit of some *bon mot* he had conceived at the oven door. As a humorist he fancied himself.

He used to joke even about the name of his bakery.

"*Cette Boulangerie du Jésus,*" he exclaimed. "It is the miracle of the loaves. They come and come; there is no ending to them. They feed the multitude. The fishes I leave to the fishermen for what they are worth. It is easier to catch fish in the Baie des Anges than to make loaves in the Boulangerie du Jésus."

One day he brought out to us a loaf which, through some mischance, had been baked hard through and through. He dashed it on to the roadway, where it lay solid and unscathed.

"*On sait bien que Jésus était charpentier,*" he cried, and burst into a loud laugh. It was a joke on which he harped for several days.

Helen once asked him why he had chosen such a name for his shop.

"*Eh bien,*" he replied. "One must have bread, one must have religion; the two go hand in hand in the lives of all men. I could have called my shop the *Boulangerie de Isaïe, de Moïse, d'Ezéchiel*, but those big names would have frightened away customers. Besides, just at that time *le p'tit André* arrived: I looked at him when he was ever so tiny and said to myself, '*Le p'tit Jésus*. It shall be Your bakehouse as a thanksgiving.' It was an inspiration, *n'est-ce pas, madame?*"

The inspiration had been justified. *Le p'tit André* was doing well; he was to become a great man. He had worked his way to the Lycée by sheer grit and was already nearly the top of his class—would soon be quite there. He was later

to go to the University, to travel, to do all those things which Hippolyte himself had been unable to do. Hippolyte had brought up the rest of his family to that idea—that André, *le sage*, the bright, hard-working eldest son, was to be the first to benefit.

The bakehouse, too, had proved successful under Pépino's management, and brought in a return which, though not princely, was sufficient for the family's simple needs. Now that Stéphanie was earning her own living, the old stocking hidden away in a secret cupboard began to bulge with money put by.

In a moment of extreme confidence, Madame showed it to Helen.

"For André," she said proudly.

"But what about Michel?" asked Helen.

"Michel will not do anything in the world." Madame's pride had been unconsciously pricked by the question. "We shall keep him at home—you see, he needs looking after. He has never been young; I am afraid he is born a good-for-nothing, like . . . like . . . one day I will tell you."

Thus in the same cupboard as the family hope, did we come across the family skeleton.

II

Now the best family skeletons are dead and dry bones held together by the wires of traditional scandal, which strengthens with each succeeding generation. But the family skeleton of the Pépinos had characteristics all its own. Only a few days after Madame's partial confession to Helen it strode boldly into the Boulangerie.

Madame was serving customers at the moment and did not notice the entrance of the strange figure. She had just handed over a couple of

metre-long loaves to a woman and had turned mechanically to the newcomer.

"*M'sieu désire ?*"

Then she looked up.

"Étienne!" she exclaimed; and there appeared in her kindly face a look so hard, so uncompromising, that she ceased almost to be Zénobie Pépino at all.

"*Que veux-tu ?*" she said. Her voice sounded like a file.

The newcomer, a shabbily-dressed, bearded giant, whose eyes seemed to spend most of their time looking into another world, smiled.

"Hippolyte," he answered.

Hippolyte was soon brought from the room in which he was washing as the preliminary to an evening's outing. Madame, meanwhile, drew us aside, so that the two men could talk alone; a heated discussion was soon in progress, in which the usually mild Hippolyte was the obvious aggressor.

"I am sorry for this," said Madame simply. "I would not have had it happen for worlds. He is Hippolyte's cousin, a professional vagabond, a *fait-néant*. I thought we had got rid of him for good and all." The poor soul was on the verge of tears.

At this moment André, with Michel trotting behind him, entered the shop.

"André, take him away," she exclaimed hurriedly, pointing to the little one. But Étienne had been quick to see Michel and, before any of them had time to interfere, he swung him up on to his shoulder.

"My successor in vagabondage, the hope of Pépino *ainé*!" he cried, in a voice that rang round the little bakery and set the loaves a-clattering on the shelves. "Do you not know your Cousin

Étienne, *mon Michel*? Has not your mamma dinned sufficient warnings into your infantile ears? And are you not going now to profit by her experience to spit in his face?"

"*Maman dit . . .*" commenced Michel.

"I don't want to hear what your Maman has told you—she has told me the same many times. *Nom de nom*, we have said things to each other, you and I, Zénobie!"

"Are you going now you have seen him?" interposed Hippolyte sternly.

"Yes, I will not disgrace your family pride before your visitors," replied the giant, indicating Helen and myself. He released Michel (who slipped behind his mother's skirts from whence he peeped shyly at his cousin) and turned full on Hippolyte.

"There is more family affection in me than you give me credit for," he said, "since I actually ached to catch one more glimpse of *le p'tit*. In a few days I leave this cursed town of bat-eyed moneybags and take to the open country again. If you had any soul beyond your loaves you would come with me. What, in the sacred name of dough, keeps you here?"

Without waiting for an answer, he turned to us and continued in excellent English,

"I beg of you, Sir and Madame, to put this incident from your minds. You are lodging with an eminently respectable family and the sight of their outcast members, however happy these may be, cannot be entirely pleasant. But because I love Michel here as I would my own child, I must come back to him before the Wanderlust overtakes me."

With a sweeping gesture of his broad-brimmed hat, he made a bow, half ironical, to the embarrassed company.

"*Au revoir, mes amis*," he said, and was gone.

The rest of the evening was spent in receiving the tearful apologies of the Pépinos.

We came across Étienne some days later. He was sitting under the exiguous shade of a palm tree on the Promenade des Anglais. Great hotels gleamed white behind him, the Mediterranean flashed its purples and blues in front, the promenade was crowded with the colour of passing visitors, and in the scene he sat like a blackbeetle in a kaleidoscope.

"So you have not yet left Nice?" I asked him.

"No," he replied somewhat moodily. "The cursed hotels still keep me here, but in a few days I shall have gone."

Neither of us could imagine the connection between this scarecrow and the luxury palaces behind him. Helen put him the question.

"A misguided parent taught me the guitar," he answered, "and when one is young one's pleasantest form of amusement is to annoy other people. I, Madame, am a *siffleur à deux voix*, paid for annoying by those whom I annoy, and also for strumming on a guitar with red, white and blue ribbons attached to it. It may not have struck you," he continued contemptuously, "that red, white and blue—especially if the blue is so vague that it may be taken for any colour—stands for several nations, and visitors here like to feel patriotic. In addition, I have learned one English song, one American, one Italian and—I have almost forgotten the German; I must re-learn it. I also whistle some popular operatic selections which people think themselves musical for recognising. I am well known in the dining-rooms of all the hotels. In short, I am one of the sights of the *Côte d'Azur*."

He stuck out his long legs as he said this, nearly tripping up a fashionably-dressed woman. She

looked haughtily at him for a second and then, with a gleam of recognition, smiled distantly and vaguely in his direction. Étienne leapt to his feet with an extravagant bow.

"Part of my stock in trade," he said apologetically as he sat down again.

He was silent for a minute, and then sighed.

"Well, what do you think of me?"

"You mean?"

"You have heard about me from my kind relations whose souls are those of rats and mice. They despise me for what I am; I despise them for what they are not. Which do you choose?"

"Is a choice necessary?" asked Helen. "Are you not, both of you, good and bad?"

"I see how it is with you," he snapped, with a sudden accession of wrath. "You want to effect a reconciliation. That is useless, Madame, you will only miss the friendship of both of us. You cannot mix olive oil with the Mediterranean. You cannot put a candle to the sun. I whistle my way along this damned coast and into the pockets of mincing dolls, not because I like it, but because I must accumulate enough righteous indignation during the winter to give me energy for the summer—energy to get away from this place. I will not spend my life sweating into loaves of bad flour—earning an honest living, as you call it. I prefer the honesty of the Mediterranean and the sunlight in refusing to follow the time-honoured methods of olive oil and candles.

"In a few days," he cried, "I shake the dust of respectability from my feet. I go to Marseilles, to Nîmes, *n'importe où*. I have taken a liking to you, my children. Will you forsake my respectable relations while you are still in their good books, say nothing as to your future movements, and come with me? I have had a good season, and we

will travel luxuriously. My offer is open until to-morrow. I shall be on this seat."

He rose, and with another fantastic bow, walked in long strides towards the town.

True to his word, he was awaiting us next day.

"Well?" he inquired casually.

"We will come," I answered.

"*Bon.* Tuesday next at seven o'clock in the morning, before it gets hot."

III

BETWEEN Nice, the Brighton of the Riviera, and Monte Carlo, lies the little resort of Beaulieu, full of fashionable villas, and backed by steep rocky heights whose lower slopes are stippled by the rainbow colours of bright creepers. It lies retired in a narrow bay, at the end of which is a toy harbour where toy yachts seem to play at sailing on the great Mediterranean, so diminutive do they look between the sea and the mountains. As if to add the requisite spice of danger to the games of the little yachtsmen, bold white rocks jut at all angles from the water, and the bed of the bay is so shallow that it appears possible to wade to the farthest of these rocks—to which tiny ripples of white foam cling constantly—without wetting more than the knees. Beaulieu, in short, is the kind of place which makes one feel very grown-up and important in comparison with the playthings around, and very small and insignificant when one's eyes follow the towering mountains to their full height, and the narrow strip of Mediterranean to its horizon.

This little spot Helen and I had several times visited solely to gaze into a few square yards of water. Those square yards were to us a magic jewelled carpet on which to travel even as far as the great Kingdom of Nowhere and to explore its wonders. They contained such a concentration

of greens, blues, purples and whites, such dazzling light and such profound gloom, such purity, such laughter and happiness and such rich melancholy, that whatever our mood, we could call up from them just those parts of Nowhere in which it pleased us most to travel.

On the day before our departure from Nice with Étienne, we made our final pilgrimage. The tram along the lower Corniche took us to within a few yards of the spot; we dropped hazardingly over a wall; and in a moment traffic, villas, harbour, everything except the immediate seashore was completely cut off.

"Whither away?" I inquired.

"That's just the question," replied Helen.

"What part of Nowhere do you want to visit to-day?"

Helen did not answer for a few minutes, and then said:

"Does it matter? Isn't every part beautiful?"—and then after a further pause:

"I should like to know where we're going with Étienne."

"Step—metaphorically speaking, of course—on to this jewelled carpet of sea, and it'll tell you."

Helen gazed at it for a long time—so long that I imagined she had fallen asleep—before she spoke again.

"Boy, I'm not certain of Étienne. He's too plausible."

"Is that what the sea tells you?" I asked.

"Perhaps."

"Then I think it's got a little of the Midi temperament itself; it exaggerates. Étienne's all right. Even Hippolyte gets picturesque sometimes, you know, when he wants you to do things for him. You've got to get accustomed to speaking in the superlative."

Helen gave an unconvinced grunt. There was another silence.

"Do you really think the sea exaggerates?" she asked suddenly.

"How?"

"Distorts. That white oval pebble down there—the one next the patch of deep blue—is really almost square. But the water does away with the hard corners of it and makes it never-ending."

"Immortal," I suggested.

"That's it. It goes on for ever being an oval patch of white light instead of a grey square. That's exaggeration."

"So's everything," I retorted. "Put a litre of the Mediterranean into a bottle and it's just colourless water, and sunlight, you know, is simply nothing at all. But when you put them all together one exaggerates the other, and the whole effect is of amazing richness——"

"And being rich is nothing more than an exaggeration of someone or something else's poverty," interposed Helen.

"True for you. But you don't think that everyone should be content to remain as he is?"

"Certainly not."

"Well then, the sort of exaggeration that this bit of sea indulges in is ambition. It tries to make itself beautiful by adorning everything around it."

"'Cromwell, I charge thee, put away ambition,'" quoted Helen tritely.

"And put away that Kingdom of Nowhere of yours," I replied. "What is that little fancy but ambition?"

"It's a sort of ideal," she corrected.

"And you're ambitious to reach it, even though you know you can't. If not, it's a jolly poor sort of ideal. No, young woman, stop bothering about

the exaggerations of the sea and the eccentricities of Étienne—you will fathom neither."

The hills behind Beaulieu are so steep that at a comparatively early hour the sun sinks behind them. It did so now, and as it suddenly disappeared like the blowing out of a lamp, the jewels of the sea—grey pebbles and the like—were extinguished with it. There remained an expanse of indigo and purple; the mountain sides were plum-colour in shadow and shimmering cool gold where the light still clung affectionately to them.

"All exaggeration," I told Helen.

"But the jewelled carpet which takes you to the Kingdom of Nowhere is true."

"It fades when the sun sinks."

"It won't fade in my memory. The sun will always be full on it."

"And Étienne?"

"Well, perhaps the sun did go behind a cloud for the moment," admitted Helen.

IV

By easy stages we made for Marseilles, sometimes travelling in the slowest of slow *trains omnibus*, sometimes walking across the red, white and green countryside, stumbling uphill and down, or crossing seemingly interminable amphitheatres of olive trees. Étienne, at these times, proved himself a capital companion, always ready with a helping word, an old friend who would put us up for the night, a bottle, mysteriously hidden in his sack, of good thirst-quenching wine, or a hunch of bread and sausage. When conversation grew wearisome, he would squat beneath a convenient tree or wall, and accompany himself on his guitar to old Provençal songs, which needed to be translated into Parisian French before we could understand a word of them.

One day it rained heavily; Étienne would not for

a moment consent to budging from the tiny farm in which we had spent the night, but passed the entire day between our lodgings, where he practised his whistling, and the nearest bar—a villainous-looking little tavern calling itself the Bar-Londres—where he accumulated moisture for further efforts.

In the afternoon he returned in tremendous anger.

“I have seen it,” he cried—“the juggernaut that carries damned souls to hell, driven by the devils that drove the Gadarene swine down the steep place and filled by twenty-odd lynx-eyed moles.”

It was just his manner of informing us that he had seen a char-à-banc. *jaunting car*

“Come away,” he cried, waving his arms violently. “Come away before the soul of Mammon enters into you, before you are willing to pay for desecrating the country and turning honest, God-fearing men and women into snobs and paupers. Come away, I say! I will not stop in this place another hour.”

Nothing would pacify him, but that we should immediately pack up our traps and go with him.

“I will not breathe the same air as those people,” he snorted as he stumped along the road. And then turning back, he spat after another car which had just passed. “Do you know the story of the blind man who thought he could see?”

“No.”

“He commenced to run, and because people were kind enough not to put any obstacle in his way, he went on running, and became more and more sure he could see. Then he was certain of it. Finally, he tripped over one of his own feet.”

“There’s a moral to it,” quizzed Helen.

“And that is,” continued Étienne innocently, “that people in those cars think they see things

because nothing is put in their way. The only true method of seeing rocks is to experience rocks—to cut your feet on them if necessary. The only way of seeing those little villages perched upon the hilltops like the knobs on halma men is to toil up the side of the halma man. Then you'll know what you're seeing—you'll have the rocks and the villages firmly fixed in your memory. But to run about this country—or any country—in a motor-car, and then to imagine you've seen it is simply the quintessence of tom-foolery, like the blind man running. And like him, tourists are their own stumbling-blocks."

"Why?" asked Helen, for Étienne paused as if he had finished his sermon.

"Because they haven't enough humour to avoid extremities," he replied sententiously.

After a few minutes he resumed impatiently:

"We aren't getting out of this country fast enough. We shall be quicker by train."

Only when we had already taken tickets did we discover a four-hours' wait in store for us.

"Why are you in such a confounded hurry to be gone from here," I asked, after every other conversational resource had failed to restore his temper, "when you know perfectly well you will come back next season?"

"By the end of the summer my moral fibre will have slackened. Even the best engines have to get up steam and the strongest metal becomes tired. Besides, a man must live."

"*Je n'en vois pas la nécessité*," said Helen, "if the method goes so strongly against the grain."

"I have already perceived, Madame," replied Étienne caustically, "that you are an idealist. Idealists are dangerous—they deprive a man of the infinite solace of exaggeration. They are mathematicians come full circle."

"Suppose you tell us how much of what you say you really mean," I put to him.

"As much or as little as most men," he replied with a shrug, "and more than most women."

"Who at least try to speak the truth," interrupted Helen, nettled.

"Thereby foolishly attempting to put religion to the test," went on Étienne imperturbably, "and succeeding in spoiling both stories—both life and religion."

Only when we were nearly half-way on our train journey did Étienne's face relax into a smile.

"These trains," quoth he, "may spoil life, but they strengthen one's faith enormously."

"How?"

"In a future heaven," he said, and mopped his brow with a big vari-coloured handkerchief.

We arrived in Marseilles in the early hours and were taken by our vagabond friend to a dirty little house near the Old Harbour. In the morning we were told by the slatternly housekeeper that M'sieu paid us his compliments and would be unavoidably absent that day. We consequently spent it alone in the City of Climbing Streets, and rowed out to the islands beyond the harbour. That night Étienne was still absent. On the following day also we were alone, and spent the evening in the only café we could find which had an orchestra. Marseilles does not seem to be a city of music.

On our way home we passed along the side of the harbour, watching the twinkling lights on the opposite hill. Suddenly Helen gripped my arm.

"There he is," she exclaimed.

About fifty yards down the road, under the glare of a cinema entrance, stood Étienne, swaying dangerously and talking in a strained, high-pitched voice. But it was not only Étienne who attracted our attention.

His remarks were addressed to a familiar figure—a dignified figure with shock head, ragged beard and lean, drooping moustache—a figure dimly reminiscent, even at that distance, of John the Baptist.

“The Pope of Avignon,” I exclaimed softly to Helen. She nodded.

Their backs were half-turned to us. We approached quietly.

“It is curious you met them,” said the Pope. “I remember them: both young?”

Étienne nodded.

“Five hundred francs,” he whispered excitedly.

“Each,” cautioned the Pope.

“To-morrow?” enquired Étienne.

The Pope grinned, and both shook hands.

“What are you going to do now?” asked Helen.

“Take rooms for one night in the most expensive and correct hotel in Marseilles,” I replied, securely fastening my pocket-book—for a thousand francs was pretty nearly all I possessed.

We packed our knapsacks, paid the woman, and entered once more on to the Vieux Port.

“*Sic transit gloria Étiennsis.*” I remarked to the lights across the harbour.

“Poor Michel,” murmured Helen. She was thinking, I knew, of the Boulangerie du Jésus.

III

IN ARLES

I

ARLES, if it were England, would be called Micawber Town, for it is the town where everyone is waiting for something to turn up. You can see them from morning to night lounging their lives away on the seats which are among the few modern improvements of which Arles boasts. There is scarcely a street in which two carriages can pass; there is—*mirabile dictu*—only one cinema; no particular business seems to be carried on in this out-of-the-world little spot; but in every inch of shade—amid the mottled sunlight of the Place du Forum, under the tall avenues of trees on the Boulevard Victor Hugo, under the pollarded groves in the Place Lamartine—are rows of hard-backed seats on which the venerable inhabitants sit, smoke, spit, discuss local politics, and, since human nature is much the same everywhere, each other's domestic affairs. It is a pleasant spot to linger in, this Sleepy Hollow on the banks of the Rhone, where a sense of impending adventure is the only thing that prevents it from crumbling completely into dust.

We found it a place after our own hearts, did Helen and I. We lounged in the huge Roman Arena; in the cloisters of St. Trophime, half Roman half Moorish; in the Alichamps, among Roman tombs; finally, and most whole-heartedly, among the other loungers on the shady side of the Boulevard.

We were sitting over a coffee one afternoon, watching the infernal white dust being raised instead of settled by the municipal water-cart, when a lorry stacked high with wine-barrels slowed up alongside us and, after a few minutes' breathless panting, shut off its engine and stopped.

A perspiring little man, with twinkling black eyes and grossly unshaven chin, carrying in his hand an immense bunch of white lilac, descended from it, shook the dust out of his clothes, raised his hat and approached Helen.

"For the English lady," he said, beaming, handing her the bunch of lilac.

Helen, I must confess, is usually a difficult person to surprise. But when the bouquet was thus suddenly thrust at her she could not restrain a gasp of astonishment.

"How lovely!" she exclaimed. "But why for me?"

"It is sent by Madame's most devoted admirer," explained the donor of the gift.

Helen turned a beautiful rose-pink—so that had her "most devoted admirer" been present I should not have blamed him for falling there and then on his knees and worshipping her.

"I think there has been some mistake," I interposed.

"But no," returned the fat man, somewhat nettled. "There has been no mistake whatever. As if anyone could mistake Madame!"

His tone, somehow, made me feel ashamed of myself, in spite of a sternly-suppressed desire to laugh. I subsided.

"I have a message to give Madame," continued this impertinent little intruder. "Her most devoted admirer begs to offer his heartfelt regrets that he cannot himself present his gift, but there was business to transact which he could not miss.

He therefore deputed me in his stead, and adjured me to press upon Madame that she should be there next Sunday also. His life depends upon seeing her."

"Where?" gasped Helen. By this time a small crowd had collected, to our increased embarrassment.

"*Mon Dieu!* at the bull-fight, of course." The "deputy most devoted admirer" was not to be put off with such quibbles.

"But I was never at a bull-fight in my life!" exclaimed Helen.

"Madame has the coyness of the South." The little man's mouth spread itself into an oleaginous smile.

The effect of this compliment on Helen was magical. Her command of the French language failed her.

"Don't be a fool!" she ejaculated in the most unmistakable English.

Even the "deputy," though apparently infatuated (for he had never lifted his eyes from her during the whole conversation), saw that she was annoyed.

"*Madame dit?*" he queried.

By this time Helen had sufficiently recovered her self-possession to give him a literal translation of her previous utterance.

"Look here," I added, as soon as I saw his face drop, "it's no use saying that a mistake hasn't been made. Madame has told you she was never at a bull-fight in her life; and, as a matter of fact, neither of us was here last Sunday. In addition to that, I think it is extremely bad taste to present bouquets from admirers in the presence of Madame's husband. If I were in England, do you know what apology I should demand?"

"No?" The little man's eyes were open wide enough now, and fixed full on mine.

I began to take off my coat and turn up my shirt-sleeves, to the immense satisfaction of the crowd.

The "deputy," however, was in no mood for that sort of thing. His eyes suddenly brimmed over with tears ; he dashed his hat on the ground.

"How can I adequately express my desolation ?" he cried, addressing Helen. "Madame, in the name of my friend and myself, I beg you to forgive me. This mistake has ruined me for life. Listen, I beg of you, while I tell you the desolating history of my friend."

He pushed away the crowd, retrieved his hat, and sat down beside us.

"Imagine how it was with him," he continued, "when at the bull-fight last Sunday he saw a beautiful English lady, with eyes like the cold northern stars—oh, so frigid!—mouth, a little rosebud—" he put his fingers to his lips and blew a ridiculous kiss which set us both laughing. "Ah, but you must not laugh. You do not understand," he cried, clutching our arms. "When we of the South see your northern goddesses, we are transported, we cry out, we faint, we fall in love. All this my friend did at the bull-fight: they might have killed twenty bulls—fifty, a hundred: he had no eyes, no mind, no soul for anything except the beautiful unknown.

"But she, on her part, was icy, disdainful, almost aghast, it seemed, at the sport of the arena. She had no eyes for him. She watched frozenly while he dumbly worshipped her. As she left the building she dropped her handkerchief. It was his opportunity. He seized it, restored it to her, spoke to her.

"She thanked him, smiled upon him. For all the week he has been basking in that smile.

"To-day he implored me to present myself to the lady—he described her to me, and where I should find her—here, on the Boulevard. It was

arranged between us that I should be relieved of certain debts if I could induce her to be present at the Arena next Sunday. I tell you these things, Madame, so as to show you I was not altogether a free agent. For these debts were to me—terrible.”

He mopped his brow despairingly.

“Now I am undone,” he sighed. “I can never pay them. My friend is undone. He will die of love. It is a sorry business, *mon Dieu*.”

He stared gloomily at the roadway for some time. Suddenly his eyes brightened.

“The Boulevard is long,” he exclaimed triumphantly. “One can but try again. Madame will, perhaps, excuse——”

Before we could realise it, he had snatched the bouquet, made a sweeping bow, and hopped on to the lorry. In a few seconds the engine was started.

As the clouds of white dust followed, we saw a bunch of lilac waved cheerily in our direction.

II

“How about this?” I asked Helen, holding up for her inspection a tiny candlestick with toy candle already ensconced. “If the Sisters of Charity have really God’s good gift of imagination, as they should have, they will understand this present for little Olga. She will be able now to burn a candle for her doll, which is just what she is longing to do.”

“Right O,” assented Helen. We paid the modest sum—you can buy children’s toys cheaply in French roadside markets—and left the booth.

We had suddenly realised that Arles was not all comedy, that there was suffering in its sunlight and tragedy lurking among its picturesquely attractive streets. Olga had brought us starkly up against the fact.

Olga’s age was only five, but her history contrasted curiously with the pleasantness of her

surroundings. When she was two, her father had been killed at the front—the big, strong, happy-go-lucky father whom she had just begun to know. To Arles he was only one of the *Enfants de la Patrie* whose names were inscribed on the big war memorial in St. Trophime; but to his little daughter he was at the same time much less and much more—a memory that was already beginning to fade, a blank that was rapidly growing perceptible.

Olga's mother married again soon after. The kiddy looked upon her new father at first with the wide eyes of childish amazement—for how had he suddenly come to take the place of her other?—and then with fear and horror. Young as she was, she soon knew what it meant to be cruelly beaten by him. For months he continued this treatment—"discipline" he used to call it—while, at the same time, her mother, to whom she ran for protection, became less and less loving, more and more casual and hard. It was so complete a reversal of her former happiness that little Olga was bewildered and scared out of her wits.

Then came a morning when she woke to find herself alone in the house. Cry as she would, no mother came to comfort, no stepfather, even, to curse and thrash her. She had been abandoned.

For some months, when we met her, she had been in the cheerless company of the Sisters of Charity, one among forty other foundlings, many of them luckier than she in having a few toys to play with and very occasional treats from friends in the town. Of them all, Olga seemed the most completely dependent on the Sisters of Charity, whose training was that of school dragons and whose instincts were those of prison wardresses.

From the moment she entered the walls of her new "home," the generous sunlight and warmth of the Midi seemed excluded. She was not beaten,

it is true, but there is a kindness which is almost cruelty.

Her one remaining joy was the Infants' School, with its shaded courtyard ranged round with tiny forms, where she spent some hours each day. It was not so much that she was *sage*—quick at her lessons and receptive of mind—; it was her only time in which to garner some of the kindness of life which her southern soul craved.

It was here that we found her as we carried our small gift of candles and little gilt candlestick. The doll given her some days previously was lying in her arms.

"*Pour ta poupée, ma petite,*" said Helen, handing her our present.

A little hand, released from the care of the doll, grasped the candlestick; two bright eyes glanced shyly up to Helen.

"*Merci, madame.*" The voice was scarcely above a whisper, but all the gratitude of her starved years was in it.

"What did you do with your dolly last night?" asked Helen. "Tell me."

"I put her to bed, Madame."

"What, without supper?" Helen pretended to be shocked.

A knowing smile came into the child's face, which ill-befitted the drab black smock in which charity had clothed her natural daintiness.

"It cannot eat, Madame. It is only a doll."

Helen accepted this rebuff meekly.

"And this morning?"

"I woke it up and dressed it and brought it to school."

"What did you bring it to school for, *ma petite*?" persisted Helen.

"I have never had one before, Madame. I wanted the other children to see it."

"And what do the Sisters say to it at the Convent?"

"Nothing, Madame. But they will not let me take it to Communion."

She slipped away for a moment to examine the candlestick. For the first time she volunteered a statement.

"I take it in the church and burn the candles for dolly," she said. "In a little corner where no one sees."

If you should, one day, visit the convent church and see in some niche a tiny gilt candlestick plastered with grease, you will know it is Olga's, in which the candles were burnt for her dolly. But by that time, probably, it will have been swept up with the rubbish.

III

FROM one prisoner to others. We left Arles by road, picking up near the station a friendly cart bound for Tarascon. We were in high spirits, as they should be who visit the town of Daudet's Tartarin, the embodiment of the mercurial Midi.

It was just after we had bundled our few precious belongings on to the cart, and had driven off at a smart pace—a pace, indeed, that we would have imagined the old horse incapable of—that the driver pulled up sharply, and pointed with his whip.

"There they go," he remarked, shifting his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other.

We followed the direction in which he pointed. . . .

There were twenty of them, chained together and guarded by armed warders—as pretty a collection of cut-throats as it has ever been our fortune to look upon. Two of them were dressed in their native Moroccan costume—except that the knife at the waist was lacking—a few more were in

ragged uniform ("Deserters probably," said our driver); the majority retained the clothes of decent workmen.

In sections of four they pulled and dragged each other silently along the road, some apparently anxious to return to the jail they had come to rely on for shelter; others shy and nervous; most of them apathetic. The warders, pipe in mouth, regarded them carelessly enough, but with just sufficient attention to urge on a laggard or restrain an impatient movement.

One of the Moroccans in the front rank suddenly raised a manacled arm threateningly at his guard: a quick prod in the ribs sent him staggering against his companions, and for a second the section was in confusion. A sharp word from the warder: the party reformed instantly, and plodded drearily up the wooded approach to the station.

"Where are they going?" asked Helen.

"Tarascon," replied the driver shortly, and whipping up his horse, left the pack behind.

It is a long, straight road from Arles to Tarascon, bordered by tall trees and low hedges, very rigid, very straight—very French; the cemented telegraph poles and the crimson-topped kilometre stones proclaimed it a Route Nationale. A few farm-houses—dwelling-place, stable and fortress combined—are dotted along its route, as dusty as the road itself. Every now and then, apparently from nowhere, rises a cluster of one-storey cottages round a well.

And on either side, stretching to the distant hills in one direction, and to the sea in the other, the broad free expanse of the Rhone valley, spring-coloured and virginal, irrigated by small shaded canals and dotted with little huts like dolls' houses.

But on the road itself, dust, dust, dust, that

filtered through clothes and cemented itself into a plaster of Paris casing for one's body.

"A curse upon the dust," ejaculated the driver. We stopped at a little buvette by the wayside.

"I will tell you something, *mon ami*," he said, "all the ills of the Midi you can attribute to dust. It fills a man's throat to choking point; and then, to relieve it, he drinks good wine which—benediction!—empties his pocket and fills his veins with hotter blood than his parents put there. Then he imbibes more dust and more wine and does things he's sorry for afterwards. Here's to the dust which gives us wine!"—and raising his glass, he emptied it at a single quaff calling almost in the same breath for more.

"That's the story of those fellows we saw," he remarked, alluding to the prisoners.

"Perhaps it's Olga's story too," said Helen to me.

Our driver did not understand the allusion, but was not to be left out of the conversation.

"It's every story down here."

"You are all prisoners then?" Helen asked him.

"Until we are caught," he replied. "Then we become free. When you are clapped into jail all the troubles of living are at an end."

"But what of those belonging to you whom you leave outside?" I queried.

"They cease to have the trouble of looking after you, that's all," he replied with a grin.

It chanced that as we arrived in Tarascon the same batch of prisoners were leaving the train for the jail—trains travel slowly in the Midi. Here, for the first time, we noticed an upright, refined youth in their midst, brought into such company by I wonder what history of weakness and good intentions.

"Doesn't he bring back Olga very close to you?" asked Helen in pointing him out.

"That's true. She also is a prisoner."

"And a more hopeless one even than these people," cried Helen. "Whatever has she done to deserve the punishment she is receiving?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Punishments aren't meted out according to deserts in this world," I said.

"By this world, you mean," corrected Helen.

"Yes."

"Why are people so proud of what they call civilisation?" she continued, "most of it's pretty rotten."

"Not all."

"No. The material part's all right. But the spiritual, I mean. And you can't separate the two. That's the tragedy."

"It's Olga's tragedy, at any rate," I assented.

"And these poor fellows'."

"But the Frenchman puts it down to the dust."

"Anything rather than blame himself."

"He's right, my dear. We're all prisoners in one way or another—prisoners of civilisation, the evil of it as well as the good. We can't help it. Why bother?"

"Well then"—Helen tossed her head triumphantly—"thank goodness I am free to choose what I shall do and where I shall go."

"You mean?"

"I'm out of conceit with Tartarin de Tarascon: at the moment I strongly dislike him. He's superficial and lazy. I'm going straight on to Nîmes."

I had liked the look of Tarascon. But what was I to do when Helen commanded?

IV

OLD ACQUAINTANCE

I

THOSE who do not lounge lose much : if we had not lounged so persistently we should not have been invited to the wedding feast of Thérèse Bessière and Marcel Dubosc at Nîmes.

We came upon them and their hosts of friends sitting at a long table in a street near the Place Montcalm. They were popular young folk ; and as Marcel had expectations from a rich uncle, a wine merchant in Paris, the match was considered a good one in the neighbourhood, and the feast therefore to be patronised at all costs—especially as Uncle was gracing it with his presence and was suspected of generous tendencies when “under the influence.” There was of course no sign of such expansiveness as yet ; for after the tiring day of civil and religious ceremonies, of a prolonged carriage drive round the town, of being dressed in one’s best clothes, the company had arrived only at the preliminary stage of apéritifs.

These, however, were proving liberal both in quality and quantity to empty stomachs. The guests were growing talkative and impatient for the waiting feast. The bride had removed what I may irreverently term the “fal-lals” of her costume and was sitting at the head of the table in slippers and shawl. The bridegroom had taken off his collar. A free-and-easy atmosphere pervaded

the entire section of street and several other loungers besides ourselves were bent on taking advantage of it.

We edged our way nearer to the table.

"A song!" cried one of the guests. "Who will give us a song?"

"I will," I yelled at the top of my voice.

For a moment every face—including Helen's—was turned in my direction. A dead silence. Then a shout of approval.

"Messieurs, Mesdames, I will sing you an English song you all know—a song we sang together when we fought side by side in the fields of your beautiful France!"

I jumped on to a small table near-by, and striking an attitude, gave them "Tipperary." Heaven help me, I would no more sing it in England to-day than I would ride a bone-shaker in a beaver hat down the Strand!—but here it was an immense success. The chorus was sung again and again, and as I descended to terra firma a dozen glasses were held out in my direction. I took that of the bride, naturally, and made my only speech in French.

"On behalf of your English Allies," I cried, "I drink to the long life, health, prosperity and happiness of the newly-married couple!"

Two minutes' din followed upon this effort. Helen was pressed into the feast: the bride rose up and kissed me: the bridegroom gripped my hand: I was immediately given a place at the table next to Uncle, and thus only one remove from the bride, while Helen was put next to the bridegroom.

There are moments of triumph in the lives of most men when, whatever may be their avocation, the artist rises uppermost in them, and they care not for their own success, but for the supreme achievement of their work. This was mine. I would

rather have been, at the moment, the author of that French speech than any other man alive !

What happened to Helen for the rest of that memorable evening I must leave her to tell you herself if she so wishes : I can only describe my own adventures until the moment when the entrance of our old friend and enemy threw us together again in the dark roadway.

I soon learnt from Uncle, who wheezed the story into my ear, how Marcel had served his country, had been wounded twice, and had also been promoted officer on the field. He was a good boy, was Marcel ; a little lazy perhaps—but then the present generation did not know how to work like the last—but good, yes, good as young men went nowadays. Thérèse was a lucky girl to have him—this in a loud stage-whisper accompanied by a sly dig in my ribs. Thérèse blushed slightly beneath her southern tan.

“ He is a dear,” she whispered ambiguously.

“ Come,” cried Uncle suddenly. “ When will dinner be ready ? ”

“ Immediately,” replied a little frock-coated waiter emerging from a neighbouring doorway. “ It is waiting.”

We formed a procession and entered the dining hall—a long whitewashed room with oil lamps and paper festoons hanging cheerily from the ceiling. I was again placed next to Uncle.

The feast is blurred in my memory. I can only remember that, as course after course was served without the slightest hint of a termination, and as my glass was kept constantly filled, I began surreptitiously to wipe my beaded forehead and count the exact number of festoons in a given area of ceiling. No boy at a school treat ever filled himself more completely with the good things of life than did I in the whitewashed room. I was

conscious of talking wonderfully fluent French—of even attempting to imitate the hard Provençal accent. I listened while the praises of everybody in the room—myself included—were sung by Uncle, who was beginning to enjoy himself. I learned from other guests the history of Thérèse, who had been considered one of the cleverest girls at her school, and who had waited for her lover through four long heart-breaking years of war. Marcel, from the opposite side of the table, poured out his gratitude for my song: again and again I wished him every happiness in the future. I clinked glasses with him, with his bride, with Uncle, with Thérèse's mother and Thérèse's father; it was becoming a mechanical business, when a glance from Helen—the only time I saw her—warned me to stop.

I waved away yet another course as it approached. Thérèse looked at me concernedly.

“*Mais, Monsieur a fini ?*” she inquired.

I smiled apologetically.

“*Ah comment !*” I became for the moment the centre of a commiserating group of guests. Then someone at the other end of the table cracked a fresh joke, and attention was happily diverted.

At last the meal came to an end.

“*Tiens, tiens !*” cried one rising to his feet. “The English m'sieu has given us a song we knew as soldiers. Permit me, messieurs, mesdames, to sing one to him which I, too, learned from his compatriots on the battlefields.”

Then in a roaring voice he gave us a ribald ditty composed by English Tommies, “*Après la guerre finit.*” I must add that it seemed rather strong meat, even for the gay company in which it was sung. I hid my face and sincerely hoped Helen's French would break down at the critical moment.

The singer himself, however, failed before that;

but his confusion was luckily cloaked by the rest of the company, who rose from the now naked table. Some of them stood round the walls smoking and drinking; others sauntered out into the street.

In an incredibly short space of time the table was cleared, taken off its trestles and placed against the wall. There was an awkward pause: everyone seemed expectant, but nothing happened.

"*Eh bien*," said a young man. "There is a piano. I will play until the musician arrives."

He struck up a lively tune. First the bride and bridegroom took the floor, followed by the other guests in quick succession. I found myself partnering a distant cousin of Thérèse's—a buxom, dark girl who fortunately knew as much about dancing as I did. Faster and faster whirled the music; and the movements, which had at first been stately, became freer and wilder with it. Gradually the room grew thick, not only with tobacco-smoke but with the fine dust that rose from the earth floor. Wine was called at the conclusion of the dance, and after a few moments' respite we were at it again. The heat was terrific.

We were in the middle of what purported to be a waltz when an enormous voice drowned the wheezy piano.

"Étienne Pépino at your service!" it cried.

The music stopped; but not more suddenly than did I. I do not know to this day what happened to my partner.

Étienne, his hair and beard more unkempt than ever, his eyes sparkling, a great guitar streaming with coloured ribbons slung over his shoulder, strode up the room.

"First, let us have a little dance I learned in Montenegro," he cried. "Take your partners, gentlemen."

I sought out Helen with my eyes; she was on

the other side of the room. I motioned her to the door.

"Well?" I queried when we joined each other in the street.

"The bad penny," replied Helen.

"He would have been worth more than that if we had let him," I remarked savagely.

"Dance, my little manikins, dance!" shouted Étienne in the distance. The twang of his guitar sounded like devils' laughter.

II

WE took good care next day to avoid any of the haunts of Étienne—we knew from previous experience the type of place in which he would most probably spend his time—and saw no more of him. We watched the passing show from a café table facing the Place des Arènes—a somewhat pretentious establishment, with white painted ceilings and walls hideously decorated with the "art" of local whitewashers. From our seat in this coign of vantage we saw the town's representatives sticking up the gaudy bills for next Sunday's bullfight in which the chief attraction was a woman, named, I remember, Angelita, who was to pose as a statue before the charging bull. (pencil)

That the old Roman amphitheatres should so completely carry on their tradition of savagery, was a fact to which Arles had already accustomed us; but that a woman should not only watch, but actually take part in the "sport," was something new to our sensitive English minds. We remarked upon it to the waiter.

"*Eh bien*," he exclaimed. "They are brought up to it, these Spaniards."

"Does your Church say nothing?" asked Helen.

"It gives them all communion before they enter the bull-ring," he replied.

Here was food for thought ; the Catholic Church giving Communion to bull-fighters in one of the Protestant strongholds of France. Who was it who said that religion was the biggest paradox in a paradoxical life ?

It happened that as we passed the Arena on the following Sunday during the progress of the Corrida de Toros, there drove up to the entrance a carriage containing four of the celebrated matadors engaged for the day's butchery—four hard-faced, sullen Spaniards, whose very cruelty of countenance lent something impressive to the magnificence of their gold and scarlet attire. An admiring crowd at once collected ; there were cheers and clapping ; but the four remained absolutely impassive in discussion with an official of the ring. Then two of them descended from the carriage and entered the stables of the Arena, from which they reappeared a moment later aiding Angelita "*la femme statue*." A more repulsive face we wish never to see, lacking every instinct of true womanliness : but her eyes were filled with tears which occasionally brimmed over down her hard, brown cheeks. One side of her face was patched roughly with cotton wool ; her arm and shoulder were swathed in bandages and she carried her cloak in her teeth.

There was terrific applause as she emerged : she had been wounded by the bull, it appeared. She rapidly took her place with the others in the carriage, and they were soon lost to view. We could trace them into the distance by the accompanying cheers.

The crowd at the entrance to the Arena was just beginning to disperse when there emerged a different figure. He was lying limply on a wooden truck, covered for the most part with rough sacking, his white, drawn face propped up on his hat.

It was Étienne.

"He saved her," said the official who was accompanying him. "A portion of her robe was caught in the bull's horn as she was making her statue, she was carried off her feet. Then this man, *pauvre diable*, jumped into the arena from . . . who can tell where? . . . No one saw him jump. His roars frightened even the bull. He seized the animal . . . must have been crazy! . . . almost it seemed by force dragged him off Angelita . . . he has paid for it, *sacré nom!*"

"Is he badly hurt?" asked Helen anxiously.

The official lifted both eyes and hands heavenwards and gave vent to a prolonged whistle.

"There is little of him left," he answered. "I take him to the hospital, but——"

Another whistle.

At this moment the dying man laboriously turned his head in our direction. His eyes lit up.

"The two infants!" he ejaculated slowly.

"What can we do for you?" Helen was by his side.

"Only go away and leave me to finish in peace," he groaned. "She really wasn't worth it, you know. . . ."

He was silent for a time. Helen, with a motherly instinct which was absent from the crowd of men, pushed into the throng, and returned with some water.

Étienne drank a few drops, and we poured the rest over his forehead. His eyes lightened as it brought temporary relief to his sufferings.

"I tell you," he exclaimed, with a touch of his old vigour, "never let your confounded head run away with you. I did mine and it has taken most of my guts with it—you'll excuse the slang, of course; no time to choose expressions. Besides, you can express best what you want to say in slang. And here's some more advice; though I shall die just the same whether you accept it or not. It's this—keep

to the beaten track ; it's safer for everybody concerned ; to fly off at a tangent from civilisation is to boomerang—and civilisation's a hard thing to hit against. Listen"—he added with a sneer—"to the complete recantation of a blackguard—when it is too late."

"I want to ask you one thing," said Helen. "We left you in Marseilles because you were planning to steal our money. Why did you do it?"

The old sinner chuckled—and then groaned heavily.

"Don't ask too many questions. I'll recant in the general, but never, never in the particular."

The relief afforded by the water was rapidly passing : it was plain that the end could not be far off. Every now and then Étienne's hands clutched the sides of the barrow convulsively as a spasm of agony beaded his forehead with sweat.

"Is there anything you would wish done for you?" It was the only time I have seen Helen's tears unchecked in public.

Étienne closed his eyes and made no answer ; we who were waiting began to think he had already passed away. Then his breathing, which had become almost inaudible, grew stentorian, the veins in his temples pulsated like snakes—it was a tremendous bracing for a last effort.

" . . . Michel . . ." he whispered, and collapsed.

The official, who all this time had been standing by callously smoking a cigarette, bustled up ; I covered the dead face with a piece of sacking ; and the corpse of a man who had lived more fearlessly than wisely was borne unattended to the dank mortuary.

I would have gone with it, but I had to look after Helen.

V

WHY THE TRAIN WAS LATE

IF we had not elected to travel by a train which stopped, on the average, twenty minutes at each station; if the station-master had not been the proud possessor of a mongrel terrier; if the buffet, where we ran for a cup of coffee, had not scandalously overcharged us; if Helen had not brought with her into France a love of all things small, both of children and animals—this story would not have been written. It is a story of how we nearly, through no fault of our own, found ourselves in the Courts for theft.

We were passing through the perpetual vineyard which extends from the Rhone valley to Narbonne and had arrived at the "southern Calais," Cette. The little port runs inland into a mountain of wine barrels, and behind it is an extensive stretch of water used only by light draught barges and as salt beds. On the narrow peninsula between this and the sea stands the station where we stopped for over half an hour, Cette being an important town as towns go in this corner of France.

We ran for a cup of coffee; the proprietor of the buffet, thinking us, perhaps, too newly arrived to have become accustomed to the little ways of such folk, overcharged us.

"Five francs," he rapped out.

"My giddy Aunt!" I exclaimed. He didn't understand that.

"*Mon Dieu*," I continued vehemently. "What do you think we have come over to France for, you old robber? To be swindled into drinking vile coffee which tastes like the water you cook your abominable snails and frogs in, and then further swindled into paying through the nose for it? Here's two francs for you, and be damned."

Helen dislikes rows, and before I had got half-way through this eloquence she had shouldered her knapsack and disappeared through the door on to the platform.

Some altercation followed inside, however, between myself and the proprietor, until I suggested that the matter might be mutually settled by the aid of the police, at which point he gracefully withdrew from the discussion and accepted the francs.

I left the accursed building to find Helen fondling a dog.

It was an ugly dog, so hopelessly mongrel that not for generations could it have had what I believe is termed pedigree. Only a complete remodelling could have made it even presentable.

"It has such sympathetic eyes, poor darling," murmured Helen.

"Where did you pick it up?" I asked.

"It was running about the platform and under the carriage wheels, little pet"—here it was treated to a kiss on its nose—"Let's take it into the compartment with us. There's still a quarter of an hour before the train starts."

With Helen a word is a deed. She was already settling herself in a corner, feeding the dog in her lap. So successful was she, indeed, that in a few minutes the brute had curled himself up and was fast asleep, Helen, meanwhile, playing the ministering angel by keeping the flies off him.

I strolled up and down the platform until within

a few minutes of our time of departure, when I stood near the compartment door.

"You'd better put him out now," I said to Helen.

"Just leave him a minute or two longer," she begged. "They always warn you when they're going to start."

A railway official was strolling up the train; it appeared to me that he was looking for something. However, I paid very little attention, as I needed all my wits about me to light French tobacco with French matches.

A couple of minutes later a second railway official made his way along the platform: he also appeared to be looking for something. A few compartments below ours he dropped on his knees and peered underneath the wheels of the train. He kept this attitude for some time—until, indeed, passengers began to collect round him. Then he rose and continued his walk, finishing up by looking under the engine.

Two others followed. . . .

By this time we were due to leave, but it appeared that the guard also had been pressed into the mysterious search. Passengers up and down the train began to take an interest in what was happening. It was all very exciting; but as the officials remained reticent as to its object, no one could really help much. We contented ourselves with furtive glances in every direction, and finally at one another. None of us knew what we were likely to find—a bomb or an anarchist or a disguised camel. We just looked and wondered, and grew more and more uneasy.

There was shouting in the distance, and from the station offices emerged an irate man very officially attired and bubbling with indignation. We discovered he was the station-master.

" . . . if you don't soon, I will have the whole lot of you sacked," we heard him shout.

The searchers redoubled their efforts under his wrathful eye. His watch was in his hand.

"Five minutes late already," he snorted as he passed us.

On his journey up the train he did everything that the others had done already. He looked under the carriages, clambered up on to the roof, dodged from one platform on to the other. All in vain: he grew almost beside himself.

"I will search every compartment, every passenger, if necessary," he muttered.

He whistled loudly, collected the searchers, and then entered the first compartment. He appeared again in a short time, dumbfounded. He entered the second. He repeated the process three, four, six, a dozen, twenty, twenty-seven times. Then he came to our compartment.

I heard a bellow, a ferocious barking, Helen's voice raised in self-defence. Pushing past the station-master's guard of honour, I went to the rescue.

"You were going to steal him. You were stopping the train. I will have the law on you," stormed the station-master.

"We were doing nothing of the sort," I answered. "Let me explain."

"And keep the train back still more. Get out while I send for an *agent*.—Henri," he called to one of his minions, "fetch an *agent*!"

"*Oui, M'sieu.*" Henri shamled off.

"We refuse to get out," I said: his manner had irritated me. "We don't want to steal your dog—we both think it extremely ugly. As a matter of fact, we were preventing it from getting run over by walking on the line."

"Listen to what they say. Do you believe them?" shouted the station-master.

"No, *M'sieu*," chorused the staff. It was a comic-opera sort of chorus in its pat delivery.

There was a crowd round the carriage, of course, and this the station-master harangued until the arrival of the law. He became jubilant when he saw us face to face with Justice.

The *agent* began by pulling out a note-book, and picking his teeth with its pencil.

The station-master explained the situation at some length: I followed more tersely with my version.

"It's a pity the dog can't talk," remarked Justice thoughtfully.

The station-master urged Justice to the extremest limits of the law. Justice explained his powers in dealing with the crisis that had arisen and apologised for not being able to do all that *M. le Chef de Gare* wished in the matter. The station-master implored him to do what he could: Justice promised solemnly. He approached us.

"You are aware that you have seriously delayed the train?" he began.

Helen replied that the train certainly did seem somewhat late in starting.

"*M. le Chef de Gare*," he continued, "was sending his dog by this train to Narbonne: otherwise it would not have been missed."

Helen interrupted with a repeated version of her intentions. Justice waved them aside.

"I must ask your names," he said, sucking his pencil afresh and spreading himself for writing.

"Johnson," I replied.

He looked puzzled.

"Johnson," I repeated.

This seemed to increase his perplexity.

"Spell it, please," he said.

I did so—three times before he was satisfied with the result.

"Address ? "

"No fixed abode," I smiled.

"But that is silly," he answered. "You must have an address, you know."

"Poste Restante ? " I suggested.

"I'm afraid that won't do," he replied, without so much as the flicker of an eyelid. Then an idea struck him.

"What about your passport ? " he said.

I showed it him. He fumbled down it until his eye caught something resembling a name.

"*Qu'est ce ?* " he exclaimed triumphantly.

"Walthamstow, Essex." Laboriously he wrote it down.

"*Et pour Madame ?* "

"Northampton." More laborious writing.

He had written down our places of birth !

"You may proceed now, *M'sieu, Madame.*" He bowed to us politely. "Father, come and we will talk over the matter."

And so he left with the station-master—and the dog.

The train gave a jubilant whistle as it at last steamed out of the station.

VI

AGE AND YOUTH

I

To be "*dans une purée*," is to be in a very bad mess. To find oneself benighted on a strange road is to be in such a mess indeed. We were, through the fault of a villager who had sadly under-estimated the distance to the next village, properly "*dans une purée*."

A great red-wine sunset, whose crimsons and purples were almost beyond belief, had attracted us out of the village of Lézignan, near to Narbonne.

"How far to the next village?" we had asked a wayside loungee. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Three kilometres, perhaps," he answered.

He must have been used to covering the distance along this old Roman road in a cart: his three kilometres lengthened into miles, and even further. The sunset died away and the heavy indigo sky above it began to shower down cold rain—our first touch of "weather" for many a long day. We pulled up our collars, adjusted our knapsacks and trudged on. It was Helen who first saw the light gleaming through the rain.

"I don't care what it is," she asserted. "We're going to stop there the night."

In due course we reached it—a tiny lamp flickering outside a barred gate. By groping, we discovered a bell-handle.

We had to wait for some time even after the last

mournful echoes of the bell had died away. Then slowly the door opened, creaking on its heavy rods, and there appeared an aged nun carrying a lantern. She put the lantern to our faces and gently inquired our business.

"We ask shelter for the night," said Helen.

"We cannot give shelter to Messieurs," replied the old lady. "To you, Madame, but not to your husband."

"But there is no other house for miles," expostulated Helen, "and we can't go on further in such rain. Couldn't you make an exception in this case?"

The nun shook her head reluctantly.

"I am sorry," she said, with an air of finality.

"*Alors*——" Helen shrugged her shoulders and moved a step away.

The old soul made a gesture of despair.

"*Tenez*," she said suddenly. "I will call the *Mère Supérieure*. Wait here, please."

She closed the heavy door behind us, and leaving us in the dark, trotted up the corridor with her lantern. Shortly afterwards the Mother Superior, robed in black, stood before us.

"You understand," she said in English, "it is not allowed for us take gentlemen here. But I have done so once or twice before on my own responsibility. You will pardon me if I take precautions, M'sieu?"

"Certainly," I replied. "It is good of you to have me."

"It is a bad night outside," she replied, "and a charity to have you within."

Leaving Helen standing at the entrance, she led me along a corridor into a tiny whitewashed cell where was a bed which she made with her own hands. A crucifix hung on the wall.

"I will bring you some soup," she said. When

she had done this she left the room, locking the door after her.

I saw Helen next morning. "How did you get on?" I asked her.

"I spent the best night of my life," she replied, "in a bed that was hard yet soft, in a room bare yet furnished, and after a supper meagre yet satisfying. If I had not married you I fancy I could almost have become a nun."

"Sleep well?" I continued.

"Until six this morning, when I heard the sisters shuffling along the corridors to chapel. I felt I ought to be going with them."

"And didn't you?" I asked in mock surprise.

"You're a cruel man to expose my weaknesses like that," she replied, pouting. "As a matter of fact, I got up when I heard them coming back."

"You, twenty-five, and they—how old?" I persisted.

"Ever so old, I should think, by the way they walked," she answered.

I asked the Mother Superior how I was to repay her hospitality.

"You could do so in money," she replied, "but I am going to ask of you something harder. I am going to ask you to work for us: we have something a man can best do."

I think that day ranks among the happiest of my life, working for the old nuns at what they could not have done for themselves, to earn a night's lodging. I do not know to what Order they belonged; nor do I care. Charity and kindness were their only thoughts.

Until midday I lopped trees in the quaint overgrown garden behind the convent buildings. At one time those in the little chapel, which was the one room accessible to all, seemed to chant, in their quavering voices, in unison with the creaking of

my saw. But there were always one or two at the foot of the tree inquiring progress and offering encouragement. In the afternoon I tossed hay on to a tiny cart pulled by a donkey and stored it in a miniature loft at the end of the garden. Helen spent her time washing our bed-clothes of the previous night.

But during the middle of the day neither of us was allowed to work. Two chairs were placed for us beneath the trees, and in these we rested until it should become cooler.

"You may smoke," said one of the sisters to me, with a sympathetic smile.

It was then that Sister Martha from Ireland hobbled up to us.

"Sure and I've been wanting to talk to ye ever since ye came here last night," she chattered. "It's good to be able to speak in yer own native tongue, so it is. An' many a year it is since we've entertained English people here."

"You've been here a good many years yourself?" I suggested.

"Near thirty in all," she replied, "an' it's a mortal time when ye reckon it up on end. The newest of us is here well over ten years. We come here to die."

"How long is it since you were in Ireland?" asked Helen.

The old Irish woman smiled sadly.

"Not for more years than I'd care to confess to ye, me dear. Its tragedy goes on, they tell me, without my presence, and, sure, I can't help it, an' I would, God aiding me."

For a moment a far-away look of yearning came into her dear old face.

"You won't think I'm foolish, now, but d'ye happen to have a bit of shamrock about ye?"

By some streak of superstition I carried, through-

out the war, a four-leaved shamrock in my pocket-book. I carried it still.

"Take it," I said, offering it to her. "May it bring you the happiness it has always brought me."

The old soul's eyes filled with tears as she clutched the flower.

"It's wrong of me, I know, to take it," she said, the tears streaming down her cheeks. "But it does me heart good to see it over again, so it does. Ye mean ye don't want it now?"

"It's for you," answered Helen.

"Sure, I've no business to have it," muttered the old nun; but she hurriedly placed it between the leaves of a devotional book, and smiled bravely.

"I've got work to do," she said, and hobbled away happy.

While I was haymaking, I watched the work of the convent progressing. A few nuns were with Helen, washing clothes and hanging them out on a long line to dry in the bleaching sunlight; others were sewing in shady corners; a few carried their devotional books into the shade of the trees. There was scarcely a sound to be heard: a motor passing along the high road seemed to be in the distance.

With evening, we all assembled in the chapel: it made no difference, the Mother Superior assured us, that we were not Catholics—our presence was none the less welcome. Then we prepared our packs for departure.

"Good-bye," I said to the Mother Superior. "We are both grateful for your hospitality."

"It is nothing," she answered gently.

The sisters pressed round us to bid us God-speed.

"Good-bye, and God bless ye both," repeated Sister Martha for the tenth time. "Sure, ye've made one old soul very happy, so ye have. I'll

be praying for ye both for many a long day"—and then, with a sigh—"An' I never thought to be glad to see an Englishman before I died."

II

WE approached Carcassonne as one might make a pilgrimage to see a Daguerreotype of one's ancestor. The old walled Cité had been restored only into a semblance of life. It was part of the gigantic backwater of the uselessly picturesque—the relic of a bygone age, whose utility had long since passed—a dead city preserved only for inquisitive visitors.

And instead, we found, within these very walls, the City of Youth. There were young things just catching their first chubby glimpse of the green world; there were young things of seventy whose conversation rested, not on their ailments, but on the adventures they were yet to have. Nobody grew old in Carcassonne—even the fourth generation of the Massios family was almost sprightly at eighty-five, with a subtle palate in wine and a keen nose for a good tobacco.

I count him the fourth generation because one must, of course, begin with Mimi, aged five and a half—on no account forget the half, please—who was by far the most important of any of them. Mimi's mother had died two years previously, during an influenza epidemic, and her father was an officer in the French Army of Occupation on the Rhine, but Mimi lived in the height of luxury with her grandmother, the widow Massios, who kept a delicious little pastrycook's shop. While Mimi, therefore, was the coveted companion of the young youngsters, her octogenarian great-grandfather, who looked in daily at his daughter's, was courted by the youngsters of his own age. The widow, meanwhile, baked her goodies contentedly

in a miniature oven in the kitchen and, I suspect, kept back a proportion for both children.

One has not much choice of feeding establishments within the old city; and the hotel being reserved almost exclusively for the *nouveaux riches*, we had no difficulty in discovering the widow Massios.

Her face, which in profile was more like a good-natured Pomeranian than anything I have seen, beamed in reply to our request for an omelette.

Then Mimi pulled back the curtain communicating between the shop and the kitchen.

"*Bonjour, Madame,*" she whispered, and put her hand into Helen's. From that time they were firm friends.

So after lunch we took Mimi for a walk and Mimi introduced us to Fanlair, the six-weeks-old puppy whose only joy was in destruction. We returned later for a cup of coffee.

"*J'ai une chambre,*" began Madame.

The man who travelled Europe with no luggage but a carpet bag was a lucky—and wise—fellow. We, too, shared his luck. Within ten minutes of her tentative remark, we were installed in her room, while Mimi waited to escort us again for a play that was to be the most joyful, irresponsible game we had enjoyed since we were foolish enough to grow up.

But it was not only through Mimi that we discovered the youth of Carcassonne. Madame Massios' shop was the centre of it. For there were *surprises*—10 centimes each—which contained sweets and medals and drawings and goodness only knows what other wonderful things: there were hectic-coloured "strawberries" at the same price, which, with careful mastication, could be made to last quite a long time; there were tiny chocolate animals, little packets of nougat, comfits,

liquorice sticks—hundreds of delights that used to bring the half-Spanish, half-French boys and girls of the Cité round-eyed to the window.

We took our meals in the shop, and thus grew to know the process by heart.

The nervous clank of the door-bell meant that one of the expectant crowd without had decided to brave the terrors of a public purchase.

"*Bonjour, M'sieu, M'dame*" meant that he paid a tribute to our vast age and experience, and his smile, that he knew us as people who stood on no ceremony.

"*Une surprise, s'v' plait, M'dame,*" meant that the widow had bustled out of her kitchen, and placing her fat hands on her knees, the better to catch his answer, had inquired kindly, "*Et toi, mon ami ?*"

"*Merci. Au r'voi M'sieu, M'dame,*" meant that he was throwing himself as fast as he could through the doorway, where he would be caught by the waiting crowd of children, and the surprise packet switched from one hand to another till it had been the round of the company.

Then the good widow would watch them through the window, beaming till her little snub nose seemed almost to disappear in the air and her faithful dog-like eyes to melt away into nothingness.

"*Ils sont tous bons,*" she would say, handing one of the *surprises* for our inspection. "I bought them myself in the market yesterday. They are wonderful things—look what they contain."

If—as happened sometimes—they contained a paper cap, folded as in our English crackers, she would perch it jauntily on Helen's head and regard the result as an artist might regard his masterpiece.

Once she stuck a cap on her own.

"One must not grow old," she said. "It is a sin. One's duty is simply to be good to others,

and enjoy one's life. That should be easy if one could find the right way."

Her own goodness to others extended far beyond the reach of her family. She pressed upon us sweets and cakes to send to Olga in Arles. One day she beckoned me to her.

"Look," she said, "there is Albert. He is fourteen months, and his father was a prisoner of war in Germany. Give him this packet of nougat, but don't say where it comes from."

"*Le p'tit Albert*," received the gift without embarrassing questions as to its donor. Nougat was, apparently, a favourite of his; and as he was supported sturdily in his father's arms, he had just nothing to think about except appreciation of the sticky sweetmeat.

"*Au'voi*," he said when I gave it him, tugging his father's cap from the parental head and waving it in the air.

"*Au'voi*," or, as it sounded rather, "Waw-waw," was Albert's almost sole venture, so far, into French. It had to serve for many purposes—for greeting and farewell, for enquiries as to his age, his well-being, the health of his parents, and a host of other important questions. But if you asked him, "*Comment t'appelles-tu, mon petit?*" he would look solemn for a second—and was it not indeed a solemn question?—then chuckle.

"Albert, *au'voi*," he would say.

"Where do you live?"

Why on earth do these grown-ups make one think so much, confound 'em!

Silence; then:

"*La Cité, au'voi*."

He was one only of the widow Massios' protégés; they must have totalled dozens. They used to congregate with their parents on the open ground in front of the old castle and discuss the

topics of the day with mature deliberation and occasionally even heated controversy.

There was a new arrival while we were in Carcassonne; and a day or two before we left, he made his first wizened appearance at the Meeting of the Elders.

"Where on earth did you come from and what, in Heaven's name, do you mean by intruding on us here?" asked dozens of pairs of baby eyes as plainly as if everyone present had shrieked it out at the top of his tiny voice.

The new infant, however, was not to be outdone.

"What a lot of old frumps!" he exclaimed to himself. "Why, they're most of 'em getting teeth!"

Which was true: many of them were getting teeth. So that the new arrival at the one end of the scale and Grandpa—or rather Great-grandpa—at the other were truly the youngest inhabitants of the Cité.

"Never had a day's illness in my life," croaked the old man, as he hobbled along one morning by my side. "What I say is—don't ever think about growing up and getting old. If you're going to die young, well, thinking about it won't put off the day. Eat and drink well, sleep well, work hard in the air, and don't worry about what you can't alter. And keep out of towns—they make me ache all over."

He smacked his lips in hearty enjoyment of his own philosophy.

"Yes, it's a young place, is the Cité," he said. "Living on top of a hill makes you healthy, and watching the visitors who come to see the walls makes you fat with laughing. I can't see them quite so well as I used to be able to, but my hearing is as good as ever, and some fine days I sit myself in a corner and listen to 'em. It's as funny as can be."

He had to support himself against a wall before he completely recovered from his humorous memories.

"There's little Mimi, now," he continued. "She's going to school and growing up. School's good, but somehow no one remains young there. They stick 'em in rooms, and not in the fields. Schools weren't meant for this place; we're all too happy for 'em. Come, here's Bioult's café: we might have a glass of wine, don't you think—while we're all young together?"

III

It was peculiarly fitting that while we were in the City of Youth, there should have been celebrated the Feast of France's youngest heroine, Jeanne d'Arc. It was fitting that we should take our part in what amounted to the apotheosis of all things young in this, perhaps one of the few cities which Jeanne d'Arc, if she could return to earth, would recognise as familiar in structure. It mattered little that the day was wet, or what festivities were taking place at Orleans or other towns more particularly consecrated to the Saint: these in the old thirteenth-century Cité of Carcassonne were simple, sincere, and bubbling over with the joyous Springtime.

Of course the town was decorated with countless bits of coloured stuff that had been saved in the houses for years—the last time many of them were displayed, we were told, was at the signing of the Armistice—the reprieve of Youth. Although the war is still very near to one everywhere in France, Carcassonne forgot it on this day, except for the salvos of artillery with which she opened the Celebration of Youth—an ungentle reminder of events best left to rot on their own dung-heaps.

Of course, too, everyone dressed in his best, and turned up at the little church of St. Nazaire

punctually to thank God for his own strength and heartiness. Even the old dames of the village, in their black dresses and white lace caps, put on an air of extra sprightliness for the occasion. The kiddies, down to Albert, rambled familiarly about the old building throughout High Mass. There was a choir of fifty children hidden behind the altar, whose fresh young voices put new heart and zest into the old service, which always retains its hold on the emotions of men. The town band, which had escorted the Town Council, well sheltered under family umbrellas, to the Church, performed lustily during the anthems as if to emphasise the fact that they, too, were young.

The celebrant priest had no need to add any emphasis of his own juvenility; his sixty-odd years had left him still eager-eyed and vigorous; but he, too, seemed to let the years drop from him as he spoke to his flock from the altar rails of the heroism of France's most popular national saint. His keen voice rose and fell as he pointed the moral: his arms, consciously hampered by the gorgeous vestments about him, worked hard to drive home a point or expand an illustration: with his head thrown back and his eyes flashing, he looked the picture of the Church Militant. What he said was of indifferent quality; but to be inside the Church with its tri-coloured altar below the deep reds and blues of the medieval window, to form part of the silent, reverent congregation of youth, made it a proud thing to be a Frenchman.

"I wish I wasn't English—almost," whispered Helen.

"Why?" I asked, surprised.

"Didn't we burn Joan?" asked Helen.

"True," I assented. "But, 'other times, other manners,' you know. We're all friends now. Doesn't that take something of the sting out of it?"

"Or show how silly it is to make national heroes of soldiers," she replied.

Perhaps Carcassonne thought the same, for on that day specially, it seemed, the people went out of their way to show us little courtesies as visitors.

"What does it matter that you burned her," they might have said. "That's all over and done with now, and much water has passed down the river Oude since, since . . . 1431, wasn't it? I never was good at dates."

And so, as we left the Church, everyone had a "*Bonjour M'sieu, M'dame*" for us. Two dear old things, family heirlooms just taken out of lavender, insisted on shaking our hands. A hearty farmer, who had also attained to the dignity of a Town Councillor, drew us aside and drank our healths in the good red wine of the country. He toasted us boisterously as Allies; and then suddenly he lowered his voice.

"I have one more toast to give you," he said. "To the League of Nations!"

He drank, and then added: "I lost four sons in the war. Down there"—indicating the new town—"they are holding military inspections. France must be guarded, we know . . . but it must not happen again."

"France sincerely believes in the League?" I asked him.

"A dying man clutches at a straw," he replied. "The League is a tree that will grow: it is very well worth clutching. May France realise all that that means before it is too late!"

With that he rejoined his friends.

We walked slowly along the narrow cobbled little alleyways which pass as streets in the Cité: we were both pondering, I think, over the common grief of Europe in her lost manhood, when the shrill voice of Mimi broke in, not unpleasantly.

"*Le p'tit chien veut s'amuser,*" she shrieked, bouncing up to us with Fanlair in her arms. Thereupon we chased the puppy round and round the courtyard of the castle till his little bellows squeaked with overwork, and Mimi confessed herself out of breath. What did it matter that it rained?—one could only be young once, and if one were sufficiently irresponsible one never caught cold.

In the evening there was to have been an open-air concert outside the walls, at which the sympathetic curé had arranged that the artistes were to be those of his flock whom he had married during the year. But the rain had settled down into the perpendicular fall which indicates its determination not to go home till morning. So we loitered under an archway to the accompanying murmur of a hidden and unsuspecting loving couple. We had done the same in Paris, but here it seemed more than ever a part of the Celebration of Youth. The two, we afterwards discovered, had been already married over twelve months; which proved conclusively that they must have been almost ridiculously young; for when people grow up and forget their youth they quickly tire of each other. It is only children who always see fresh things as they walk along the same road.

And so these two found it in no way strange to sit hand in hand in the darkness and exchange long kisses, although they had lived together for many months. Indeed, it seemed that their enjoyment was increased by this sense of intimacy; there was no vague, dark spectre between them. I wonder whether Joan of Arc, a spinster, understood as she watched them from Heaven?

VII

THE OPEN ROAD

I

"COME to the fair," cried Mimi, "*tout le monde y va.*"

Now it is a plain duty in France to attend the travelling fairs which halt for several days, or even weeks, at bigger villages and towns. Helen was always conscientious: we went, with Mimi tripping along like a fairy beside us.

"Look," she cried in rapture as we approached the big boulevard near the Cavalry barracks. "Ever so many shows to watch and so much music. And Grandma gave me five francs. Let's hurry."

I doubt whether Grandma could afford the money: but she had generally a habit of spoiling little Mimi—and who could help it?—enlivened by periods of strictly enforced discipline, during which the child went almost in terror of her life. It was not that dear Mme. Massios was in the least hard-hearted: far from it: I verily believe such periods were intended more as a salve to her own conscience than as a part of a considered plan for Mimi's bringing up. Now, however, the mood was relaxed: hence the generosity.

In response to Mimi's command we hurried, and at every step the blatant music grew louder, the shouting and bell-ringing gradually more intelligible; the mass of broken light which had swung

to and fro among the dusty trees of the boulevard composed into side shows and tempting stalls, flickering oil flares and the small steady lamps inside the caravans. The hurrying crowd about us gradually thickened : everyone, as Mimi had said, was going there.

Then we drew level with the first stall : and after that a perpetual delight of shooting galleries, roundabouts, strong men, houp-las, mountain railways, headless lions, boxing booths, sticky sweetmeats made before your eyes, fat women and anatomical museums, with such a hullabaloo of singing, shouting, laughing, screaming, blowing of trumpets, banging of drums, grinding of organs, barking of dogs, as has never been heard before or since, except in countless other fairs up and down the entire world.

In fine, it was just a happy fair to which all the peasants thronged in eager enjoyment and in which Mimi's five francs were swallowed up in an incredibly short time. For five francs does not go far when one indulges in merry-go-rounds, wooden horses, and vivid sweets.

Helen, however, came to the rescue ; and when she was tired I took her place in attempting to tire Mimi. But the child was out for pleasure, and it was with difficulty that we induced her at length to sit down in a quiet corner to recuperate.

We had chosen one behind the caravans, when a gruff voice in the darkness made us all start.

"What do you want here ?"

"Rest," I answered. "Have you ever taken a child to a fair ?"

"*Moi, en effet !* Why should I do any such thing ?"

"No, of course you wouldn't," put in Helen sweetly. "What he means to ask is whether you've ever tried to tire a child by amusing it ?"

"As to that, Madame, I make my own four walk." (A cock tethered by one leg to a wheel of the caravan crowed confirmation of the statement.)

He came into a patch of light—a big, humorously solid man, with tanned, lined face and powerful chest. From where he was he could see us more clearly, and apparently we embarrassed him, for he remained silent for a moment.

"I did not know what you were doing here," he apologised.

"No harm, I hope," I said.

"If Madame is tired she would perhaps prefer to rest inside," he added, dragging off his cap with a rough politeness. He opened the door of the caravan, in which a light was burning.

"Oh!" exclaimed Helen and jumped into the interior at a single leap.

For a row of burnished copper pots, twinkling in the lamp-light, hung along one side of the van, and on the floor rested a huge earthenware pitcher, in which greens and blues mixed magically. A little roll of white bedding set off the massed colours with glorious effect.

"How perfectly sweet! Is it yours?" Helen's hands assumed the position of a saint in rapture.

"Madame is pleased?" the fairman smiled, gratified.

"It's magnificent," I told him—"the sort of thing an artist longs to paint."

"M'sieu is perhaps an artist?"

"A showman like yourself, my dear fellow, who showed his tricks in the pages of a newspaper. Shall we say, a member of the chorus?"

"M'sieu has perhaps left because he did not like it?"

"You're wrong," I replied. "I loved it. Just as you love to give enjoyment to people in the glare of the lights, so did I in cold print."

"It is also hard work," he assented.

"Most enjoyment is!" I said, thinking of Mimi.

"It is good to have one's friends," he added, after a pause.

"The people one works with?" I asked.

He nodded.

"The best of fellows," I exclaimed.

"We will toast them," he cried, suddenly enthusiastic. Out came a bottle and some glasses: and each of us saw different pictures in the purple of the wine.

"You stay here long?"

"Three or four days only," he replied. "It is never worth while to stop too long in one place. We shall come back next year."

At this moment there entered a small woman, whose large earrings set off to perfection the jet-black of her hair and the flash of her eyes. She hesitated a moment on the threshold when she saw us within.

"My wife." The showman's cap was again dragged from his head.

The smile with which she greeted us lit up her rather heavy features, so that at the moment she was almost beautiful. Then she looked reproachfully at her husband.

"M'sieu and Madame are welcome, but, you know, René, the van is very untidy——"

"It is wonderful," interrupted Helen.

She smiled again and drank some wine.

"We are not doing so well to-night," she said, addressing her husband. "You had better liven things up."

He slouched out of the door into the dim and flickering darkness.

"He can always make things go," she told us. "He can talk so as to amuse people."

"Which stall is yours?" asked Helen.

"We have the shooting gallery," replied the woman. "It has been popular lately. And René makes people come to it: he has so many tricks. Some of them return, year after year, to hear him talk. He bullies them, teases them, cajoles them. They love it."

Outside, the breeze carried occasional sentences of the talented René.

"... better than that ..." he was shouting, "... didn't they teach you better than that in the Army? Aim at the camel—that's big enough ... Another miss! Good gracious! ... Ah, I see how it is ... yes, in my own courting days she always made me nervous ... Look the other way, my girl, so that he can aim better. The poor boy is trembling ... Careful, now! Oh, Elizabeth, he has missed again. You will bring him no luck! ... Not Elizabeth?—Irène, then? Agnès? ... Well, they are all pretty names! ..."

There was pride in his good wife's eyes as, later in the evening, he brought in the first bundle of earnings—dirty notes, copper and nickel coins and all the expedients—stamps and tram passes—to which lack of small change had at that time put France.

"It is thirsty work, *sacré nom*," he exclaimed.

"And you?" he inquired. "If it is not rude to ask, where do you go next?"

We shrugged our shoulders. He broke into a hearty laugh.

"The true vagabond," he exclaimed. "Come with us to Toulouse."

"Shall we?" I asked Helen.

"We shall upset your arrangements?"

"By no means," replied the wife kindly.

"We have a tent," explained René. "We shall put you in that."

"Heavens above!" exclaimed Helen suddenly, "what's become of Mimi?"

II

THREE days later we bade farewell to the City of Youth and clambered up into René's caravan, which was in the advance guard, as it were, of the fair. The main body left Carcassonne the next day.

It was not a surprising thing that we had seen nothing of his children on our first visit, because, we discovered, they had a habit of sleeping wherever they chanced to feel tired. The eldest, a sturdy youngster of twelve, usually made his bed in the shooting gallery when the fair was open and weather permitted. The second boy slept with a cousin who had only one child of his own, and the third, of whom nobody took any particular notice, did just what he jolly well pleased. But what about Baby?

Baby, it appeared, enjoyed the prerogative of all youngest children in being the darling of her parents, besides which, as the only girl, she was entitled to some extra consideration. She slept, therefore, the hearty sleep of three years, suspended in a basket from the roof of the caravan. The atmosphere must at times have become somewhat thick, but Baby showed always a bright morning face when the basket was lowered. It is also to be remarked, that once she had been put to bed, no further sound was heard from her; from which it may be inferred that she was in some ways a model child.

The day's programme, as we plodded the ninety-odd kilometres to Toulouse, never varied. We rose with the sun and by half-past seven at the latest the whole caravan had been cleaned and polished like a new pin, the old horses groomed, the trailer on which the make-up of the shooting-gallery was carried fastened behind the dwelling van and the night's camping ground left behind. Two hours' halt was made in the middle of the day

when the sun grew fierce and by dusk our tent was pitched and we were preparing for the night.

"You'll have to walk," said René on the first day. "The horses have already as much as they can carry; and you're strong enough."

So we all walked, only Madame and Bébé, both of whom had domestic duties to perform, being allowed in the van. Occasionally the boys, and sometimes Helen, perched themselves on the tender, but René had always a sharp eye on such backsliders, and the boys knew what it meant to feel a flick of his whip when they rode too far. He himself was a silent soul, striding for mile after mile at the horses' heads without uttering so much as a word. Perhaps a long-drawn "*Huě!*" would be now and again necessary to sharpen the animals' wits; then René would lapse again into silence.

"I need it all at other times," he said when I taxed him with being no very cheerful companion. "A man cannot go through this world shouting at the top of his voice."

"Some men do," I suggested.

He grunted. "*Tant pis pour eux*," he said. "If you talk you cannot think. I prefer a *cigarettes*, a broad hat and a white road: one can meditate for long with these three."

"On what?" I asked.

"On the impertinence of asking unnecessary questions," he said and spat into the hedge.

No other word was uttered until we halted for the night.

René came nearest to conversation when we had eaten our frugal evening meal—bread and sausage usually—and the red wine had warmed his veins.

"Tell me," said Helen one evening, "why are you going this way?"

"Madame means?" he asked. René was always scrupulously polite to Helen.

"Towards Toulouse, and not towards Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer?"

"We are not gipsies," he replied with a touch of pride, "and we do not go to those gipsy feasts. Their songs and dances and rites are nothing to us. We are of pure Gascon descent. The feast of the St. Maries, they tell me, is a curious sight, but *sâle*. . . ."

He puckered up his nose and shrugged his shoulders as he said it.

"There are a few in our lot who go there every year," he continued. "Curiously enough, they are the ones we do not like."

"The feast is a two-days' affair, I believe?" I enquired.

"And nights. Drinking and feasting, and not often without its tragedy. They mount a guard over their shrine, but neglect to do so over themselves. A mixed lot, and *sâles*. . . ."

Again the pucker of the nose and expression of disgust.

"From seeing your van I can understand your dislike of dirt," said Helen.

"It is a beautiful home," he replied proudly. "And one can take it where one wishes, with only the trouble of accompanying it."

"I should imagine it a better job to be a showman in France than in England," I put in, remembering certain glimpses of English caravan life.

"Some years ago I met some Englishmen with a fair," replied René. "Madame will understand me when I say that they were *des gens fort drôles, par exemple*."

He rose and yawned.

"But I must not decry Madame's countrymen," he said. "When one is impolite one should either go to bed quietly or be sent there."

We stayed with the fair in Toulouse for a week,

wandering about the dusty boulevards and leaning over the bridges which cross the broad Garonne. We struck up an acquaintance, too, with a little corporal whose love of absinthe was likely to be his final undoing. He was a well-educated youth, with a notable fluency in English swear-words; but when he discovered our connection with the fair, his sense of what befitted our station in life was so grossly outraged that we saw no more of him.

In the evenings sometimes, I was persuaded to act as a decoy in the shooting gallery. My method was to form part of the crowd, and then casually to examine a gun.

"Go for the camels," René had said to me beforehand. "You can't miss them."

There were, besides, metal lions, horses, dogs, cats, tigers, leopards, giraffes, bulls, and even, I recollect, crocodiles, serving as targets; but René was right when he said that the camels were the easiest to hit.

"Look," he would shout as I potted one exactly in the centre of the hump. "Look at that. Now, if he can do it, you can hit a giraffe in the neck. Come and have a try."

Usually the ruse would work; and as I retired to make way for more paying customers, a momentary flash of René's white teeth would tell me that he appreciated that fact.

"What do you want for it?" he asked one night when he had done unusually well.

"Only to be allowed to journey a few more kilometres with you," I answered.

"As far as you like," he replied with a laugh.

And so we took again to the westward road, arriving in due course at the village of Boussens, which watches from a distance the snow-capped Pyrenees. Here it was that René and his fair took the high

road, while Helen and myself contented ourselves with the low road—the railroad. It happened like this.

I had played the decoy with moderate success on the first of the three evenings the fair was stopping in Boussens : on the second, things, in a very literal fashion, hung fire considerably. On the third, a crowd of youths, of whom René obviously had great hopes, gathered round the stall.

"It is a trick," muttered one of them, watching my shooting.

"Come yourself, then," cried René. "Try the neck of the giraffe."

The silly youth did so, and, of course, failed. A second fared no better.

"Look at the guns he gives us," said a third.

"Choose your own, then," cried René, nothing daunted. "*Mes amis*, make way for the M'sieu who would choose his own gun."

There was a sheepish laugh at this ; but the victim was nettled by René's amiability.

"We will come back later," he shouted, as several of them left the booth.

Sure enough, they did so ; but the first intimation we had of their arrival was a blow with a big piece of timber, used as a battering-ram, which knocked the lightly-constructed side of the shooting gallery completely in. With a shout of triumph the beam was wielded again, and in a few seconds, it seemed, only a pile of broken wood remained, over which René lay with a damaged head and sprained ankle. His tongue, however, was in very excellent working order.

He twisted himself into a sitting position.

"It was you, you rogue," he yelled, pointing a trembling finger at me.

"What on earth do you mean ?" I replied. If anyone had kicked me I could not have been more surprised.

"You egged them on," he cried.

"In gratitude for your kindness, I suppose?" I retorted. "Or in anticipation of further favours?"

He made no reply to this, but turned to his wife, who had rushed from the caravan when the smash occurred.

"Have you missed anything from the van?" he cried. "These people are thieves and robbers."

The crowd gathered round the shouting invalid began to show hostility to us.

"Who are you?" they asked us.

"According to our friend René, we are thieves and robbers," I answered. "Bring a *gendarme* here, and we will satisfy him as to our identity."

One was soon forthcoming. With much pomposness he examined our passports.

"Have M'sieu and M'dame anywhere to sleep to-night?" he asked.

"Not at the moment. I don't think we are very popular tenants with our last landlord."

"I have a bed which you could use. If you will come with me I will see about it."

We thanked him in all sincerity.

"Thieves and robbers," shouted René, as we shouldered our packs. He had been carried inside the caravan.

"If you miss anything you will find us already in the hands of *M. le Gendarme*," I cried back.

As we left, the copper pots were twinkling on their hooks, and the magic blue-green pitcher was standing near the doorway, half illuminated by the oil-lamps. René was spread on the floor of the van, cursing volubly. From up above, gently swinging her basket, Baby stared with wondering eyes on the strange scene below.

VIII

HEART'S DESIRE

I

"HUE," cried the peasant driving his oxen, "*Cardinal, Cardinal!*"—which means "Turn to the left." The patient beasts in the plough turned obediently at the tap of his stick, and continued their monotonous rotation of the field. The peasant mopped his forehead.

A torrid heat brooded over the valley in which Helen and I were plodding. To the mountains clung dense black clouds of thunder, but as yet the storm had not broken. The birds were still, the brilliant butterflies which had so far accompanied us were making for shelter. An unhealthy smell rose from the undergrowth. The silence was tense.

Out of this silence came a vague low cry. We could not trace it: it seemed part of the atmosphere. We turned a corner. . . .

She was sitting at the roadside at a point where it crossed a patch of sparsely-covered moorland. Some sheep browsed about her: a tiny baby, so still and so tiny that it looked doll-like, lay in her arms while her bent body heaved again with her sobbing. She had thought no one near; and as soon as she heard our footsteps, hurriedly dried her eyes—smiled, even.

Helen, however, was not to be deceived.

"You are in trouble?" she asked.

"Not more than most," replied the girl in a subdued voice.

"Is baby ill?"

"No."

"What is it, then?"

The girl shook her head. "Nothing," she answered.

"But you do not cry for nothing," persisted Helen.

The girl gave a little scared look and for a few minutes remained silent. Then:

"I cry for peace," she said.

"From what?" Helen sat down in motherly fashion beside her.

"Oh, from everything. The world is so cruel. I have prayed fervently to Our Lady of Consolation, but alas! in vain."

"Tell me about it." Helen's persuasive tone was not to be resisted.

"Let me make baby comfortable first . . . I don't know why I should tell you, Madame, but as I shall probably never see you again, perhaps it doesn't matter. How old do you think I am?"

"Eighteen or thereabouts."

"Madame is discerning. Yes, I am eighteen. And a year or so ago I married against my parents' wishes. They live in the same village as I do, but I am forbidden their home until I am of age. It sounds little, but do you know what it means?"

Helen shook her head. "Not all," she replied.

"It means, Madame, that you are outcast from everyone. Father is one of the largest farmers about here, and, of course, his word is law. I used to be known and, I believe, liked. Now people pass me with scorn. 'There she goes,' they say, 'she will soon be moving to the town.' You know what they mean; and I am a respectably married woman.

“ ‘Why could she not have waited?’ they say . . . I who waited so long. Is it a strange thing, Madame, to fall in love when you are fifteen? These older people who know life so well say it is; but all the same, I know better . . . much better. . . .”

“And your husband?” asked Helen softly.

“He is a man: he can look after himself. Besides, he is out in the fields all day and does not see me cry. I do try, Madame—I try very hard—to be cheerful when I am with him, but it is difficult, sometimes, when one lives in a hovel. You see, he is a peasant, and my father was all the more incensed that I should throw myself away on such as he. And when my father is angry he says all sorts of things he does not mean.”

“Like René,” I mused, wondering how far behind his caravan might be; for we were only just turning off the main road into the valley.

“And yet,” continued the girl, with a brave smile, “I am happy, you know. It is only occasionally that I am weak enough to cry. But I do not think I have deserved their sneers—the village folk, I mean. When I pass my father in the street—as I can’t help doing sometimes—he never looks at me. I think mother would, but she is afraid. It is so lonely and so cruel. . . .”

She was again silent; and then:

“I only want peace,” she said. “It is my heart’s desire.”

The storm broke, and we took refuge in a deserted cottage.

“*Huê*,” cried the peasant to his oxen, “*Cardinâl, Cardinâl!*” and they continued their monotonous rotation of the field. They did not bother about so small a thing as a storm—they must plough on.

I wondered what the girl’s husband was doing at the moment. It might indicate much.

II

WE discovered our City of Heart's Desire near to where the exile girl had told us her story.

A great cathedral broods over it, and every house is a palace. Only one road approaches it, and this climbs steeply up the side of the isolated hill on which it is built, so that whether you be pilgrim or tourist or inhabitant, you must toil up its rough surface alongside the ancient ramparts and enter by the old gate, guiltless now of portcullis or other military accessory. Even before this you must have walked hard miles by a stony road : for Heart's Desire can be achieved only by *peine forte et dure*. But as you reach it, the mellow bell of the Cathedral will, as likely as not, toll out a solemn and reserved welcome to you, as if it were specially celebrating the arrival of a friend. That it is merely sounding the half-hours seems impossible : its vibrations have the confidential charm of a secret shared, an understanding taken for granted.

From the Cathedral cloisters you may see up and down the green valley and over to the blue fir-covered hillsides—perhaps, here and there, catch a glimpse of the snow-covered Pyrenees. But while we stayed there, these distant views—almost, indeed, the opposite hills—were shrouded in soft grey mountain mist, and we were thrown back on to the intimacy of the cloister itself, with its sarcophagi of priest and crusader, its deep cool well, its soft relaxing shadows, its exuberant grass through which sprang hosts of tiny flowers. It is not ten yards from corner to corner, this refuge from even the green and empty world of the hillsides, and the merest whisper runs round its arches with disapproving stridency ; but here we found all the drama, pathos, and humour that a busy life could hold.

"See this," said Helen softly, pointing to the carved capital of one of the arches—"two monks fighting for the possession of a stick."

"And fine, strong fellows they look, too," I said, "like the one who was birching his brother monk in the choir-stall carvings."

"Is it intended as humour or pathos?" she asked.

"It's history, and whatever you like to make of it," I replied. "You might ask the monks in the little cell outside what they think."

For outside the Cathedral is a small cell, attached, I believe, to a monastery at Toulouse; it contains some eight or nine monks—youngsters most of them—and, when the Cathedral organ is not playing, you may hear their murmured prayers, the harmonium in the cell mingling with their boyish voices. Sometimes they come down to fetch water or make modest excursions to gather roses in the village; but at few times do they rest from their labours of humiliation and praise.

"I wonder why they live in that uninteresting house," I mused, "when every other one in St. Bertrand de Cominges is a relic of the days when monasticism was at the height of its power."

"Perhaps it would make them proud," suggested Helen.

That was probably true; it must make any tenant—except those who actually inhabit them—proud to live in dwellings with such a history. For every house is a count's castle or bishop's palace—you may see the armorial bearings of their original owners over any door you choose to look at. The first two that greet you as you enter the old city gateway bear the dates 1440 and 1549. Nor do you find any touch of restoration.

"Can't you see the gay-coloured nobles and

sombre priests going to and fro in their courtyards ? ” whispered Helen.

“ Or the laden pack-horses bringing up the food supplies and the crowds of chattering servants waiting to unload them ? ” I suggested, “ or the silent men-at-arms waiting their turn to defend the city during those religious wars. ”

“ Then, ” pursued Helen, “ when the original nobles were dead and their descendants had moved to Versailles and Paris, the small merchant owners of these same houses—stiff-necked men, with a quick eye for a bargain ? ”

“ Imagine what the Revolution must have meant to such a place as this, ” I assented. “ Half these armorial bearings have been defaced by axes even though their owners were dead for centuries. And there’s a lot of damage, too, in the Cathedral. ”

“ And now, ” continued Helen, “ what is left of it all ?—empty shells ; stables and haylofts where there were once feastings and masquerades ; poor, mean-living people who have not the intelligence or the wish to think beyond their own little potato patches. Why, even the Cathedral is now only a parish church. ”

Helen’s soliloquy was interrupted at this point by the flutter of a brood of chickens in the grass-grown lane. A few yards away some ducks were making what use they could of the eighteenth century fountain, whose jet of water ran neglected into the cobbly gutter. A slatternly woman, on whose face was written well-founded suspicion of the whole world, passed with a cheap enamelled jug of thin milk. The pale sun melted into a cloud and the mountain mist fell almost at once.

“ I wonder, ” resumed Helen, “ whether there is any hope for a place like this. ”

“ How do you mean ? ”

"Whether it wouldn't be better to pull it down and start afresh. It's outlived its usefulness: it's in the way—all except the Cathedral, from which came Bishops who were Popes and Saints: they are still useful, either as warnings or as examples. History may repeat itself perhaps. But the rest of it?"

"Would you like it restored?"

"No,"—this emphatically.

"Would you like a modern town on this site?"

I queried.

"No, I suppose not," replied Helen dubiously.

"But it seems such a pity."

"What?"

"This waste."

"It's no waste, surely?" I replied. "Except in the sense that practical-minded people like you would call any refuge a backwater and any meditation waste of time."

"I'm only I, and I can't be anyone else," pouted Helen.

"Suppose you had been severely battered by this cruel old world," I suggested, "wouldn't you like to end your days in such a quiet remote spot as this, with the Cathedral bell to remind you pleasantly that your troubles are over?"

"Perhaps."

"With the spirit of the past around you and the children stretching out their hands to the future?"

"But the children would grow up and leave, and no one would take their place."

"They would come back—in time."

"Yes, but in what time? You want the world to stop for you."

"That's just what it doesn't do here. In this forgotten spot you're in All Time and in No Time. You're deep in the Midst of Time: but it's so big you can't grasp a fraction of its size, and it moves

so fast you don't see it move at all. It all seems as silent and peaceful and awe-inspiring as the Dream City men call Heart's Desire."

"Maybe you're right."

There was still a note of doubt in Helen's voice.

IX

THE FIERY CROSS

I

I WONDER, if we had always our Heart's Desire, whether we should not be rather melancholy folk, because there is something cloying in contentment. At least, so Helen and I found at St. Bertrand. For, on closer inspection, it proved not only a dead city but a withered city—a city of stunted human beings. The postman who passed our window once a day had a withered arm; two men who kept a *débit de tabac* had a withered hand and a withered leg respectively; the children were crooked and rickety and halt. As we could not offer help, we decided to do the next best thing.

“For Heaven's sake, let's go,” exclaimed Helen one morning. “The sight of so much avoidable suffering which one cannot cure is beginning to get on my nerves.”

So, in spite of heavy rain, we shouldered our packs, and left the illusions of Heart's Desire behind. Our original idea of going to Luchon, where rich invalids foregather with those who imagine themselves sick, was distasteful: we made for the high road.

For the first few miles it rained steadily. The fields were deserted. Once or twice we passed heavy oxen dragging a farm waggon, which looked, like its driver, sodden and glum—not even creaking its way as it does on happier occasions. We had to

ford the overflow of a brook which had burst its banks and was pouring over the road. Except for the monotonous splash and uniform grey of the rain there seemed no sound and no colour anywhere. The mountains had gone. St. Bertrand gone. Everything that was familiar had deserted us.

Gradually it cleared. The rain ceased, and, as the clouds lifted, the road stretched in front of us every kilometre or so marked with its gaunt wooden wayside cross. Indeed, one measures distances, here, by them—"the fourth cross on the right-hand side," you will be told when asking the way. Women appeared in the fields. We entered upon the life of the high road, and were soon splashed by passing motors.

We put up that night with a good soul who dried our clothes before a blazing log fire on an open hearth—so that the whole room was pungent with the acrid-sweet fumes of the wood—and set off again next morning.

It was still early when we first saw caravans in the distance. By midday we had caught them up as they were about to halt.

The last of them had the familiar aspect of René's. The shooting gallery, patched up once more after the affair at Boussens, was on the tender and the eldest boy walked behind it.

"Hullo," he said as we called to him. He had his father's gift of silence.

René himself looked at us sheepishly enough. He was riding on the front of the van, his ankle roughly bandaged. His wife had taken his place at the horses' heads.

"So you have come back," he grunted.

It was we, this time, who preferred to keep silence.

During the halt his wife drew us aside.

"You will forget what he said at Boussens?" she asked us. "He did not mean it. It was a great calamity to have the gallery broken up as it was. M'sieu will recognise that."

"We'll let the matter drop, of course," I said.

Réné seemed grateful. At the midday meal he silently lifted his glass in our direction and drank. We followed suit. Not a word was spoken on either side, but the past was healed in the pledge.

"Will you come with us?" he asked afterwards.

"To where?"

"Tarbes."

We nodded. We might as well go there as anywhere else: it mattered little. With René we should at least have shelter if it reverted to bad weather.

The sun now, however, was blazing, and we had left behind the region of shade. A great plain of tough grass, thistles, heather, broom, and other useless beautiful things, stretched about us: to the South, the snow on the mountains winked and stared and dazzled against the colourless sky, and the fir forests below, with lighter green glades cut through them by the tree-fellers, made one think that evening had fallen there prematurely.

"If all this could only be made known to England," I said to Helen, "the Alps would have a powerful competitor."

"With holiday-makers?"

"Yes. This is richer, more concentrated than Switzerland, without lacking anything of its attraction. What a pity it's so largely the preserve of wealthy invalids."

"But would you have the place over-run as Switzerland is? Switzerland must have been very lovely in William Tell's time—but now——"

"It's good enough for the people who go there."

"It isn't the people I'm talking about, it's the place itself. It loses its romance."

"That's sheer stuff and nonsense." Talk of this kind, to use an Americanism, "gets me riled."—"The most romantic place I know is Margate beach on a Bank Holiday. There's romance enough there to charge one's mental accumulator for a life time."

"True, but here's a different kind of romance, the kind that belongs to mountains, the romance of solitude. It belongs specially to these Pyrenees. For centuries they have cut off one country—an amazing country in its good and in its evil—from the rest of Europe. They've kept back influences which would have changed the course of world events—if there had been only one pass in the whole of their length you and I might have been leading very different lives. Now you're wishing they could be thrown open for the world and his wife to stare at. Don't you see that you're tampering with the foundations of history—and not only history, of Europe?"

"Most of history has got to be pretty considerably tampered with," I suggested, "so that it may not repeat itself."

"In wars?"

"Yes."

"Then these Pyrenees have probably been the means of avoiding more slaughter than any other agency. They kept out the Moors. They've worked well, my dear, for international peace. Now let them rest free from tourists, to enjoy for themselves their romance of solitude."

I fear it is not altogether good to be plastic in the hands of one's wife.

During one of our midday halts I wandered into a village church and saw there the epitome of the war. Before the crypt altar, in the semi-darkness,

was laid a wreath of withered flowers with a little metal tablet "*Protégez mon mari.*"

I suppose some poor woman placed it in dread and longing and faith when her husband left for the Front: thousands of women in France did the same. They heard of vague terrible happenings to other people's husbands; but it seemed impossible that anything could befall one's own. "*Mon mari*" was always, somehow, different from other people's. And yet . . .

"I wonder if he came back," whispered Helen.

I could find no later wreath of thanksgiving for his return: perhaps when he turned the corner and strode, worn but cheerful, into the house, emotion was too deep at first for that; and afterwards, a candle, a prayer together, a kiss, a laugh and the normal life shaped slowly again before them.

"Or perhaps," I said, "he came back mutilated, blinded. Or a brief official communication——"

"At any rate, we shall never know."

Which is true. For we can see only her agony in the flowers she left, and even these will soon drop into dust. But her helpless cry will remain, for it is written in iron.

On the third day we reached Tarbes, birthplace of soldiers from D'Artagnan to Marshal Foch.

"What an infernal hole," I exclaimed. "Its only purpose seems to be the manufacture of artillery—and that is the purpose of the Devil. Come away."

II

WE left Tarbes by the first road that presented itself and sheltered that night in a grey stone, grey-tiled village surrounded by tall trees in a slight dip of the hills.

It happened that Anton Peresc and his donkey were setting out the following afternoon on a

journey, and as a portion of our road to Where you Will was his, we hung back for him. But Anton was a glummer travelling companion even than René; his deep-set eyes always seemed to be looking back into themselves. A Spanish curse levelled at the donkey was all the conversation he vouchsafed and a grunt and a touch of his tight-fitting Basque cap the only parting when we left him.

So we trudged on and on. A sharp shower blotted out for a time all except the grey road; then evening set in, misty and cold. Suddenly Helen stopped.

As if suspended from the sky, and waxing and waning in brilliance as the mists drifted across it, hung a fiery cross. In a moment of exceptional clearness it seemed to attach itself to an immense black hill. One or two tiny lights flickered below it.

"Lourdes," said Helen.

I suppose we are very much in the position of thousands of others whom the war has left somewhat scarred in matters of faith. To indulge in a Credo would be somewhat irrelevant in these notes: it would need so many exceptions and qualifications that most of it can be put into the single phrase that we are groping for an ordered creed while the essence of religion is still within us. We do not look for any particular church or "ism," but for a creed that shall satisfy ourselves even if it satisfies no one else. Is not religion the most intimately personal and individual of all man's affairs?

To us, therefore, as we walked towards Lourdes, it seemed that the fiery cross was symbolical not of any particular faith or belief but of the core of one's mind, which, whatever outward semblance it may take, contains the essence of religious vitality. It seemed that anyone, Quaker, Catholic, Buddhist, Jew or Agnostic, could, if he once realised this, do reverence in his own way to

the Cross in the sky. It represented not Christianity but any reconciliation of oneself to the rest of the animate and inanimate, the spiritual and the material world.

In another vein, it held out high hopes of Lourdes, the Mecca of the Catholic sick. Its dominant position, its illumination—albeit electric—the thought which placed it, make the Fiery Cross a stroke of genius. What if we should find all Lourdes like that?—if it should be really the City of Faith?

For nearly a week we tried to discover this Lourdes of piety and miracles.

We watched one English crippled girl, wheeled to and fro in a bath-chair, who, before we left, could walk, clumsily and painfully no doubt, but still, walk. We saw hundreds of others in as desperate a plight go sorrowfully away, unhealed for all their earnest cries of "*Seigneur Jésus, ayez pitié de nous.*" In front of the Basilique, we saw faith enough to make even it beautiful and flippancy enough to damn it for ever. We saw men and women kneeling devoutly in the mud of the streets—and others mounting the Sacred Steps on their knees as if taking part in a race. And we saw pilgrims, often from afar, behaving themselves after the manner of trippers.

"After all," said Helen, "it's just the person who counts."

"Why?"

"Can you imagine miracles happening to those people?" she retorted, pointing to a jovial crowd of young men outside a café.

"Why not?" I answered. "Would a miracle be more likely to happen if they all looked melancholy? Perhaps, indeed, a miracle has happened, and that is why they behave as they do."

"I don't see anything of it."

"It isn't a miracle you're looking for," I replied,

"it's a peep-show. You want something that'll make you open your eyes and say 'Oo!' But I don't suppose you realise half the number of real miracles that take place every day."

"Not here!" Helen was decided. "The atmosphere's wrong."

It was difficult to reply to that. When a religious resort like Lourdes resembles the cheaper type of English seaside town in its rows of shanties containing tawdry wares; when the various real and alleged relations and connections of Bernadette,—the girl to whom the Virgin of Lourdes first appeared—advertise themselves at length and expense in the hope of gaining thereby a better livelihood; when even hotels are named in such a fashion as to shock a quite ordinary person; when in short commercialism presumes upon devoutness,—miracles are indeed miracles. Lourdes seems bent on making money out of the troubles of its pilgrims; too often it is simply a religious shopping centre, such as could not possibly exist in any Protestant country. Though it is equally true that the incidentals of an English cathedral town are strange commentaries, sometimes, on our own national faith.

"I find it almost impossible to pray here," a Catholic told me.

Yet there are others who apparently have no difficulty. A blind Irishwoman was led every day to the ceremony of Benediction, where the Host is elevated and prayers offered before each sick person for his cure. She used to sit on a shaded seat, her eyes, sightless though they were, following every movement of the holy procession. Her mouth, each day, nervously twitched the same prayers and her hands, moist with strain, clasped and unclasped, folded and unfolded the pleats of her skirt, never at rest, trembling violently. As the

prayers and the Host drew step by step nearer, the tension to which her whole being was subject increased : she was beyond the call of worldly things, wrapped in the ecstatic contemplation of a God Whom she conceived as All-Merciful to those in pain and sickness. It was Him alone that her blind eyes saw, to His Sacred Mother that she opened her heart, the blaze of His glory that filled her soul when the unseen Host was raised and the priests added their prayers to hers for sight to be restored.

And every day the procession moved on, leaving her to be led back to the Pilgrims' Hostel. What agony must she have suffered!—the agony of believing herself too unworthy or her faith too feeble for His notice! To-morrow, perhaps, she would pray more earnestly ; though who would say that she had not to-day put all her soul into her supplications? The sweat of prayer with which she was covered would have given the lie to such a suggestion. But to-morrow the miracle might happen . . . to-morrow . . . to-morrow.

And she was led back, still blind, to her sad lodging, the shop-keepers sold their tinsel and tawdry, the Procession of Healing made its daily round, pilgrims left despondent, pilgrims arrived with hope in their hearts, men and women raced up the Sacred Steps to the glory of what they imagined was God, crutches were added amid thanksgiving to those which surround the walls in the miraculous grotto of Marsabeille. All this happened to-morrow.

Perhaps Lourdes is, indeed, the City of Faith, but not of one Faith. I remembered the Fiery Cross on the Pic du Jer, with its elemental appeal to every man and woman. Helen was right : it is the person himself who counts. But there may be, as well, a Presence which, for want of a better name, we call God, who counts even more.

18
18
X

MARCUS

I

ANTON PERESC met us one day in the cattle market at Lourdes. He ambled in our direction and touched his peakless Basque cap to Helen.

"Do you want to buy a donkey?" he said abruptly.

The grey stubble on his chin and his introspective eyes made him look horribly cunning when he tried to smile. Had he been wise he would have kept rigidly to his scowl, which (a choice of evils) suited him far better.

He threw away the bitten end of his cigarette, and refusing the one I offered him, rolled another out of villainously black tobacco and stuck it in his mouth.

"It's quite good," he jerked at us.

"You seem to enjoy it, though it would be too strong for me," I remarked.

"The donkey, I mean." Anton had a temper when he chose. "Do you want it?"

I could not, out of sheer devilment, refrain from asking, "What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing," he snapped. "Do you suppose I want to cheat you?"

"What do you want to sell it for, then?" I asked.

He grunted and turned on his heel.

"Not so fast, *mon vieux*," I expostulated. "Don't forget we haven't refused it yet."

This brought him back at once, but his expression was sour.

"Do you want it, yes or no?" he asked.

"First let us see the noble beast."

I don't think either Helen or I know much about donkeys; but we did our best, during the inspection, to look as though we did. I fancy I was beginning to impress Anton when I stooped down gingerly to feel its legs; but just then Helen made a fatal mistake.

"What do you feed it on?" she said innocently.

"Does the purchase include the saddle?" I asked quickly, to cover Helen's blunder. But it was too late.

"You feed it on—anything will do," replied Anton, with what appeared a faint gleam of amusement. "We might strike a bargain over the saddle."

"What's its name?" asked Helen.

"What you like."

"It's a dear old thing, isn't it?" At the moment I could cheerfully have kicked my wife. I had no desire to be saddled with a donkey.

"Let's have it, do." There was no drawing back then. For the tone of supplication had gone deeper than language, and Anton perceived that, with Helen, it was as good as sold.

And why, after all, thought I, should we not emulate Stevenson in the Cevennes?

So we adjourned to a neighbouring café, and after an hour's haggling and wrangling, the donkey, plus pack saddle, changed hands for a fairly reasonable sum.

We must have made an amusing trio as we left Lourdes next morning and struck into the heart of the mountains. I led with the donkey on a

short halter. Helen and a stick brought up the rear of the procession. The donkey brayed vigorously as we passed through the town and shied at various imaginary objects. We proved an effective counter-attraction to a passing wedding. Lourdes once left behind, Helen cried a halt.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"I'm going to christen him," said Helen. The donkey pricked up his ears and chewed wood from the fence.

"Listen," Helen told him. "Henceforth you shall be known as Marcus Aurelius. Marcus was a wise philosopher and I think you follow in his footsteps. Now don't disappoint me, there's a dear."

Marcus Aurelius went on chewing.

We marched steadily forward the whole of that day with the noisy torrent swirling past us and beds of blood-red clover peacefully drifting between the golden-green grass which carpeted the valley. On either side the fir-covered mountains rose increasingly threatening as we mounted higher. Dark clouds hung on their summits and more vaporous masses poured down their sides. The air grew chilly.

"This is the proper way to see mountains," I suggested.

"Um," replied Helen dubiously. "Why?"

"Because mountains are hard, cruel, isolating things. There's no kindness, no friendliness in them," I answered. "Why should they be seen in gracious weather? Sunshine and blue skies don't fit them: they ought to be in a perpetual thunderstorm."

"But modern science——" began Helen.

"——has taught us to avoid them, not overcome them," I continued. "Étienne was right when he said that the only way to know what a mountain

means is to climb up it in the worst of weathers. You'll know all about it then."

"Well, then, you ought to be enjoying yourself," said Helen. It was raining by this time, and the road had become steeper.

Marcus Aurelius brayed ironically.

It was useless to point out to such companions that mountains weren't intended to be enjoyed. And a deluge of rain made conversation impossible.

There was difficulty over Marcus when we sought shelter for the night. Between us, we picketed him in a field—his docility was, in my opinion, his best point—and retired into a friendly cottage. In half an hour he was squeezing himself through the open door.

This time we picketed him more firmly, and were left undisturbed till the early hours, when Helen began seriously to wonder whether he was not ill.

"I've never heard a donkey bray like that," she exclaimed, anxiety in her tone.

"You'll get used to it in time," I answered. But we were both beyond sleep.

"We'll make a long day of it," I said. "All France rises early: we'll do the same."

So we took to the road well before the sun had topped the hills.

Marcus Aurelius, however, after the light work of the previous day, felt skittish. At first he refused to budge from his meadow, and being at last resigned to further journeying, insisted upon walking on the wrong side of the road, where he proved himself an intolerable nuisance to passing carts and cycles. At one time he took an intense dislike to a bullock waggon; later, to his own shadow; again, to a bridge we had to cross. But throughout these proceedings he preserved such an air of injured innocence, of readiness to compromise, even of anxiety to do his best for all

parties, that Helen's stick lay unused in her hand. She left it entirely to me to look after him and just loved him more than ever. I worked out a theory during the day of the psychological connection between Marcus and——

"Do look where you're going," exclaimed Helen. I narrowly missed a passing cart.

It began to rain heavily once more in the afternoon and increased to a deluge. No village was in sight, and to go further was useless. We took shelter in a barn.

"Rotten!" said Helen gazing with melancholy eyes at the grey landscape.

"We'd better stop here for the night," I suggested.

"What about Marcus?" she asked.

"Well?"

"Have him with us?"

I nodded. Marcus, intelligent beast that he was, snorted.

There were some remnants of old hay in the barn, and these we gathered together into the least draughty corner. Marcus we fastened to a post.

Some time during the night, Helen shook me vigorously.

"Wake up, can't you! I believe you'd sleep through the Flood," she rapped out.

I was awake in an instant. I am not used to being rated in this way by the best wife in the world.

"What's the matter?"

There was no need for Helen to continue. If I was awake before, I was aroused now. . . .

Outside in the night the rain was still falling steadily, aided and abetted by a raw wind. In the pitch-blackness of the barn I heard a trickle and then a "plop"; a silence, another trickle and a louder "plop!" Suddenly a bath of cold water,

released from the roof we could not see how, descended full upon me. I sprang to my feet, gasping.

"That's the second," said Helen stoically. "We'd better move from here."

We groped our way into another corner.

Plop . . . plop . . . plop . . . souse!

Our third bed was more difficult to choose. There seemed not a dry spot in the barn. We were wet, hungry and miserable. Marcus Aurelius, too, shuffled uneasily: he had, at least, enjoyed an evening meal. He was a greedy brute.

We decided upon our mackintoshes, but had, in our pilgrimage, left our packs in some distant corner of the barn—they might as well have been the other side of France. Search as we would, they eluded us; only the "plops" followed unerringly on our heels (and other parts.) We grew wetter, colder, more and more dispirited. I hadn't even a cigarette: Helen, too, was without solace. Instinctively we huddled close to Marcus for warmth—and he seemed grateful.

As we sat in misery and hunger, the first grey light of a drenched dawn broke, to increase our sense of utter desolation.

We spent the remainder of our rest at the barn door, braying in unison.

II

I DON'T know what freak of fancy made us pass Luz and, cutting away from the main valley, turn to the left towards Barèges. In its lower part this side valley is pretty enough, stiffly uphill by a winding road, and well covered with poplar and other bright-coloured trees. Nearer Barèges it becomes desolate. Enormous sweeps of shattered rock descend from the mountainside. In one place the road was blocked to traffic by a huge boulder and in another by old snow which had frozen.

Barèges itself has twice within recent years suffered badly from avalanches, and now lies largely in ruins.

"What is the use of rebuilding?" ask the inhabitants. "We rebuilt once, and a second avalanche swept away our work. If we set to again—who knows?" So they sit looking at it during the long summer and autumn evenings, and in the winter and spring do their best to put the memory of it out of their minds altogether.

We were just on the outskirts of the town when our attention was attracted by an approaching figure. A boy it was, apparently fourteen or fifteen years of age, intended by nature for a giant but lank and weedy and shambling in his gait. He seemed to cling to the inner curve of the road as he walked.

"Be careful," I said softly to Helen as he approached. "I believe he's blind."

Helen led Marcus to the middle of the road, but the boy, sensing our approach, stopped alertly until we had passed. Although they appeared almost normal, his eyes were sightless.

We saw him next day, still edging near the inner curve of the road.

"Young Bourtouloume?" said our host. "Yes, he's blind, right enough—blind from birth. He was born a short time after the first avalanche, I think . . . let me see, in . . . 1907. It swept away his parents' house and killed his father, a worthy man if ever there was one . . . a big loss for the town also. . . . His mother died when he was a few months old, poor little chap: she never recovered from the double shock. . . .

"His aunt took him to live with her after that. He did what he could at school, but that wasn't much. You see, we have nothing special for such cases in an out-of-the-way spot like this, and the master at that time was not a good man—he

became very much disliked in the village on young Bourtouloume's account. We did our best for the lad, of course, but he was always shy of our kindness, and proud. . . . He is consumptive, I think.

"Then, in 1915, after the war started, his aunt's house was destroyed by another avalanche . . . it had been left by the first. His aunt went, too. . . . The boy was at Lourdes, awaiting cure, and returned to find himself so much alone!"

"What on earth does the poor chap do now?" I asked.

"Oh, he's not poor," replied our host, misunderstanding me. "He has always enough to live on, and to spare. He is only about fifteen, but a man already."

"He has had enough trouble to make him one," commented Helen.

"And to give him more than one grey hair."

We saw Bourtouloume daily, but he would never enter into conversation with us. He used to sit in a meadow lifting his head pathetically towards the sun and the mountains. Sometimes he laughed to himself an almost merry laugh; at others he would appear fretful and restless. But, on the whole, in a way which appeared almost miraculous, happiness predominated: having lost so much, he seemed doubly to dread missing one jot of existence. He tried, poor fellow, to live up to the hilt—strained every nerve to catch the joy of life as it floated unseen past him.

One day our host ran to us with distressed face.

"Have you heard?" he asked.

"What?"

"Young Bourtouloume . . . dead . . . fell over the cliff into the stream. He could easily have got out if he had had his sight, but he must have floundered away from the bank . . . the current

struck his head against a rock. Drowned in half a metre depth of water . . . !”

The hideous funeral, with its accumulations of black, seemed an insult to him whose life had been spent in unrelieved darkness. The golden yellow of the sunlight he had missed should have been strewn around him, but if anyone had the wit to think of it, custom was too iron a band to be broken by one man's thought. So he was buried with black pomp on a day of gold and green, with a dreamy wind rustling the trees, such as he used to put his head up to and sniff like a terrier. All the village attended, the endless service at last sung itself out, the body was lowered. . . .

“Let's go from this place of death,” pleaded Helen.

We prepared Marcus and set off down the valley towards cheerful Luz.

III

THE thermal station of Luz—St. Sauveur, straddling across the valley which leads to the famous Cirque de Gavarnie, is a go-ahead little place, with enterprising ideas for further development. It has its eye on more advanced resorts and hopes before long to leave them far behind both in amenities and trade. The valley is rich in minerals; the torrent from the Cirque, foaming in its narrow gorge, is an inexhaustible source of power; but the electric installation of the town was, in its then condition, unworthy support of the legendary derivation of the name of Luz, the Place of Light.

When we arrived on the scene, a comprehensive scheme was on foot to make in Luz such a blaze as would shine from one end of the Pyrenees to the other and in the valley to produce such a voltage of power as would move them bodily across France. Everybody was talking about it, from the

shepherds in their little slate-built *granges* on the mountain-side to the easy-going proprietor of the hotel in which, for lack of homelier accommodation, we put up for a few days with Marcus.

"Luz is really coming to its own," said everybody.

"We shall all be waiters," added the shepherds.

"Our hotels will be bigger than ever," the proprietors.

"We shall be rich," the shopkeepers.

"We shall be a power in the Pyrenees," the Town Councillors.

The man in whose hand lay the open sesame to all this fabulous wealth—a short fussy man, with square white beard and wrinkled face—was also stopping in our hotel. We were first brought into personal contact with him when he complained of Marcus' early morning behaviour.

"Such a beast is impossible," he declared, shrugging his shoulders and spreading out his hands. "I, who suffer already from insomnia . . ."

"He is not used to motors," I explained. "And the garage next door is very noisy in the early morning. It disturbs him."

"He ought to be electrocuted!"

"M'sieu could perhaps arrange . . . ?"

"With pleasure. Just run a wire . . . pouff! . . . it is all over."

I dislike a man without a sense of irony, and the cool, matter-of-fact, literal way in which he descended into details of the operation maddened me. However, I started on a different tack.

"M'sieu is perhaps connected with the electricity scheme?"

He puffed out his chest and bulged his eyes. If it had been possible for him to pat his own back, he would have done so.

"I am the electricity scheme. . . . It is entirely in my hands."

He took from his pocket an immense card, heavily engraved, and handed it to me. On it I read

“NAPOLÉON BAX,
BORDEAUX.
Ingénieur Électricien.”

With the exchange of cards, Marcus mercifully dropped from the conversation, and the Luz Electricity Scheme took his place.

Whatever may have been his shortcomings, M. Bax was an enthusiast. He showered on me every detail of the scheme, maps, plans, sections, specifications, every paper in any way relating to it. He trotted me on to an open space in front of the hotel, and waving his arms over all the adjacent hill-sides, pointed out where this was to be placed, where that was going, where such and such wires were to be run to such and such stations to be installed.

The next day he insisted on taking me over the ground.

“It is a wonderful scheme!” he cried at least a dozen times. “It will make Luz the finest resort in the Pyrenees if only the Town Council will live up to it. Minerals too—any quantity of them—will run down the valley from the mines above. . . . A wonderful scheme !|

“There was one map I omitted to show you yesterday . . . I will do so this evening.” And we careered down the hill-sides like a couple of mad things, M. Bax’s coat-tails catching unheeded in bushes, his stick waved in front of him, a gleam of triumph, which even his moist handkerchief could not remove, lighting up his face.

"I must work now," he exclaimed as soon as we reached the hotel. "In two hours I will show you the map."

While waiting, I exercised Marcus by riding him some distance into the hills—I had done enough uphill walking for that day—and then leaving him free to make the best of his way down. During the descent we lost each other and it was not until I heard a melancholy bray coming from a stream at some distance, and entirely in the wrong direction, that I was able to put on his rope and lead him into the village. The result was that I was late for the interview with M. Bax, whom I found in the garden of the hotel with maps and papers spread around him.

"Ah," he said when he saw me, "this is the map I wanted you to see—leave the donkey where he is—it shows more clearly than any other the full extent of the scheme. You can see here the chain of stations we are proposing to build down the valley with cables to each mine, to Gavarnie, to Gèdre, to Luz, to St. Sauveur. These blue markings are the entrances to the mines. The black lines are light railways—a difficult and expensive job in such a narrow valley. You saw this morning some of the places where work is just beginning: now come outside and I will explain to you more clearly with the help of the map."

He seized the map in one hand, myself in the other, and trotted us both out on to a point of vantage. Here he repeated his antics of the previous evening in pointing out the various portions of the work, but this time much more rapidly, more fully—if possible, more enthusiastically.

Thoroughly exhausted, but with a sense of having achieved something which mattered, he returned to his table in the hotel garden.

It was bare.

M. Bax seized his head with both hands and ran to view the utter void. He fell on his knees to inspect the surrounding ground, pushed his face into the air to search for wind, exclaimed, repeated, implored Heaven, and finally broke down altogether.

"Gone!" he cried tragically. "Gone! Everything gone. Maps, plans, specification, contracts even! Stolen, perhaps! Who knows! *Ah sacré!* What to do, what to do!!"

He rose to his feet.

"I will contain myself," he cried while the tears still trickled down his cheeks; "but gone! All my work for nothing! What will become of the scheme, I ask you?"

"But have you not duplicate copies?" I enquired.

"Not here, not here," he wailed. "At Bordeaux, yes; but not here."

He called out the entire staff of the hotel, and between them every square inch of the garden was searched.

At the same time I made two important discoveries.

Marcus was missing.

A chewed corner of paper, which I slipped into my pocket.

One by one the staff returned to report their failure; tragedy was written on their faces—tragedy for their own advancement, as well as for that of Luz.

"Call in the police," cried M. Bax. "I will offer a reward."

"Why not fetch the fresh plans from Bordeaux?" I asked gently, wondering at the same time what I ought to do.

"It would be more expensive," replied M. Bax. His emotion, evidently, had not conquered his sense of economy.

"It doesn't look as if you'll get them back," I said.

"One can but try," he answered with philosophic resignation.

At this moment Marcus innocently wandered on to the tragic stage. M. Bax for a moment eyed him suspiciously. Then his face fell.

"It is not possible," he muttered to himself.

Close upon Marcus came the blue and silver policeman to whom M. Bax announced a fifty-franc reward to whomsoever should find the missing papers. While the fateful sentences were being uttered, all of us stood tensely by as if we expected the policeman suddenly to produce the thief from his pocket. Even Marcus appeared to take interest.

Suddenly, in the middle of his discourse, M. Bax stopped and clapped his hand to his head.

"No," he cried, striking an attitude. "I offer no reward. I will go to Bordeaux and return with a strong box! My bags, my bags."

The entire staff rushed into the hotel to prepare his things for the journey—for it must not be forgotten that M. Bax was a power in the land of Luz—while he strode impatiently to and fro.

"A car," he ordered imperially; and the awe-struck boots, who up to this had been too dazed to move, rushed to obey. In less than ten minutes M. Bax's belongings were placed in the motor and he himself was standing on the step.

"You will keep my room for me," he demanded of the proprietor. That worthy bowed low.

"If the plans should be found, you will hand them over to the police to take care of."

Another bow.

"*En route, alors.*"

A cough from the engine, a cloud of dust, and M. Bax had started on his journey.

Marcus, that night, was distinctly off his feed.

"I shall have to tell your mistress what I think of you, you brute," I exclaimed.

If ever a donkey had a sense of humour, Marcus had. I will swear he laughed in my face !

IV

BEFORE there was time for the estimable M. Bax to return, we retreated from Luz. Our flight was made all the more hasty by the fact that Marcus ate a shawl from a shop stand—a meal which cost us a cool fifty francs.

"I'm disappointed in him," said Helen.

"Can't say I am," I replied. "I never expected much from such a lop-eared beast."

"I wish I hadn't called him Marcus Aurelius," sighed Helen.

"Don't worry," I said, "it's only part of the general foolishness of naming children before you know them. You call a girl Daisy and she grows like asparagus; or a boy Horatio Nelson and he becomes a mild bank clerk. Children ought not to be named until they're sixteen years old at least."

"Couldn't we alter his name ? "

"I'd much prefer to alter his ownership." Thus I began to push home the wedge. "He'll be landing us both in the local police court if we aren't careful. And neither of us has got the money to pay a fine : Marcus has arranged that, confound him ! "

The fifty-franc meal had indeed brought our resources almost to vanishing point, and notwithstanding the paper we used in calculations and plans, we could not increase them. It became plainer than ever that Marcus would have to go.

"It's no use selling him here," I told Helen. "He's notorious already."

But we found an unsuspecting fellow in Pierrefitte, at the end of the valley, who wanted a

donkey and who was apparently deceived by our efforts to spruce up the miscreant Marcus. He inspected him closely.

"What do you want for him?" he asked.

I named a price; and after forty-five minutes' rapid and concentrated argument, was glad to pocket two-thirds of it. Marcus—the action was typical of him—brayed with unmistakable sarcasm as the money was handed over.

We shouldered our packs and struck out for Lourdes.

"Poor old Marcus!" exclaimed Helen, after some time.

"Don't like carrying a pack, eh?" I inquired.

"Beast!" was her only answer. She hates having her sentimental bubbles pricked as much as I sometimes enjoy pricking them.

The two days' leisurely tramp to Lourdes, however, was chiefly occupied in financial conversation. The money which the dear departed had put into our pockets would not carry us far.

"We'd better open shop," suggested Helen.

"Why not deal in donkeys," I answered ruefully.

"I've an idea," resumed Helen suddenly, "we might open an English bureau in Lourdes."

"What for?"

"Anything. There are lots of English pilgrims and tourists. You could get enough material together in a day to make yourself useful to them."

"But that's done already," I objected.

"Then get your say in before the others," replied Helen shortly.

"Besides, my precious pilgrims might ask for too much information."

"Of course," replied Helen innocently. She is an adept at avoiding compliments.

When we arrived at Lourdes I spent an exhaust-

ing day at the Basilique, the hotels, the station, the castle, and finished up in what seemed to me a "newsy" looking café.

Sure enough, I heard vaguely of the arrival, the next afternoon, of a pilgrimage from England. I waited outside the station.

"Excuse my pestering you so soon," I began, "but I represent the English Pilgrims' Information Bureau and I should be pleased to help you in any way I can."

The first of the party stared at me without speaking; and then, turning on his heel, walked away. I repeated the formula to a second.

"Any English beer to be had about this place?" he asked.

It was not at all the opening I had expected, but I seized it.

"Come with me," I said.

I left him an hour later, contented in my mind that the scheme was a good one.

"Show me round to-morrow morning?" he asked. "I'll bring some friends with me."

I did well that day and made further appointments for the next. The English Pilgrims' Information Bureau was booming.

For a fortnight it continued to boom. Every day it dropped into further luck. In addition, one or two trifling commercial speculations on which I ventured promised to turn up trumps. Helen, like the good needlewoman she is, was busy to some effect. Money began to rattle again in our pockets.

Then came the slump. No English pilgrims arrived. I had one day with an American and three with nobody. Helen alone brought grist to the mill.

"By the time we've paid our rent," I said, "we shan't have a fat lot left."

"We shall think of something by then," she answered cheerily. "Why don't you take to translation? There must be lots of it to be done."

So, acting as my own traveller and keeping at the same time a keen look out for further pilgrims, I made once more the round of Lourdes and brought back three days' work with me. Then just as it seemed that nobody in England or any English-speaking country was writing to anybody in Lourdes, the note arrived from Paris.

Henry Bristol, its writer, having heard of me from one of the returning English pilgrims, inquired whether I should be at liberty to show him and his family around Lourdes and the surrounding district from such and such a date onward. He wanted the thing done properly, did Mr. Bristol, and regardless of expense.

I wired him that I should be free on the day he mentioned and then waited on half rations.

At the time stated he arrived—a tall slim man with colourless wife and three bouncing daughters. I had thought myself by this time fairly well versed in local matters, but he taxed my historical powers sadly; and whenever my answers did not come up to his expectations would look at me with an unnerving mixture of shrewdness and sadness and consult a guide-book. Unfortunately, he would never let the guide-book out of his possession.

But in spite of his continual inquisition I took to him exceedingly. He was a generous employer and an acute-minded man with a vein of sly humour it was prudent in general to avoid, since it could, if necessary, cut like a lash. But I did not hear him once bitter or cynical at other people's expense as smaller-minded humourists often become.

I took his party round every corner of Lourdes, and judiciously avoiding Luz, to Gavarnie and

Cauterets. He asked me to go with them to Pau and I accepted.

On the night before his departure for England I was chatting with him on the hotel balcony.

"I'd like to show this view to some of my friends," he said musingly.

"It's magnificent," I answered.

"Know Liverpool?" he asked suddenly, apropos of nothing.

"Tolerably well."

"Indeed? Know Dr. Birch?"

Now it happened that Birch and I had been on very good terms. I was able therefore to tell Bristol a few new things about his medical friend.

He listened quizzically for some time and then shot a question.

"What about the English Pilgrims' Information Bureau?" he asked.

"I don't quite understand you." The ground was becoming rather dangerous.

"All gammon, isn't it?"

"If you think that——" I began.

"Don't flare up. I mean what I said. What are your qualifications for the job?"

"As good as other people's."

"Just so. Nil, in other words."

"Very well, then"—I turned on my heel—"I'm sorry to have intruded under false pretences."

"Bosh. You're hard up, aren't you?"

"No."

"I know better. I once did something of the same myself. Come and have a drink—to Birch."

Next morning he handed me an envelope.

"It contains some good advice," he said, "written on many sheets of paper. Don't open it till we've gone."

I obeyed instructions.

It contained double the money I had asked—and that was a fairly stiff amount.

I wired to Helen: "Join me at Pau and celebrate."

XI

THUNDERWATER

I

THERE is a superstition among folk of the Pyrenees that thunderstorms can be heard approaching in mountain torrents.

You are walking along a valley road on a hot, still day, when the stream, which no longer merits the name of *gave*, seems almost too exhausted to move—and during the summer many of the mountain brooks degenerate into a feeble trickle. As the road takes a sudden bend, so as to bring you out of the sound-shadow, the murmur deepens momentarily into the semblance of a distant roar. Then, say the Pyrenean peasants, you have heard the thunderwater: a storm is approaching.

The torrent which runs past Pau is seldom, if ever, quiet; always a lively, often a tempestuous stream, bearing the deepest snows from the mountains into the broad Adour, falling rapidly, twisting convulsively over rocks, through narrow gorges, and by pleasant pastures towards the ocean. Throughout most of its course it is flecked with foam and hurled hither and thither by rapid currents and insidious whirlpools, always tattered, turgid, rebellious, stubborn—and sometimes thunderwater.

We sat by its banks one evening when great indigo clouds obscured the fine panorama of mountains to the south and illuminated, by comparison,

the big white hotels on the terrace behind us. Sultriness hung like a pall over everything: even the *gave* was oppressed. A grasshopper started his song, but after a few chirps abandoned it. Neither Helen nor I spoke.

Without any warning the torrent suddenly broke into a roar—it was a weird sound, like a great animal in pain. Then it sank, as suddenly, to its former oppressed murmur.

“Thunderwater,” I said musingly.

Helen made no answer for some minutes and then said quietly:

“Doesn’t it call you?”

“Where?”

“To the big thunderwater—the sea?”

“Aye. Do you remember the blues and greens of the Mediterranean?—the sort of colours you see in dreams before you wake up to the dirty fact of the Thames?”

“But the Mediterranean is sunshine water,” said Helen.

“It’s pretty bad thunderwater too, at times,” I added, “black thunder.”

“What about the Atlantic, though?” she asked.

“The Atlantic may be thunderwater also, or purring water, or green jealous water, but never sunshine water.”

“It’s so strong,” suggested Helen.

“It’s cruel—like mountains,” I said, “always cruel. Most of nature is—fascinatingly so, with a deep constructive motif beneath its cruelty.”

“What motif?”

“Haven’t a notion. But it’s there: otherwise something would have come along before this to change the course of things. The world can’t live on cruelty alone.”

“No. This southern France proves that. Do you know of any place more kindly?”

I shook my head.

"Nowhere," I said.

"And yet," mused Helen—"the bull-fight."

"That's the blot on the 'scutcheon," I answered.

"That and laziness."

Helen raised her eyebrows.

"From you of all people!" she exclaimed.

"My dear girl," I retorted, "I may be awake to other people's faults, surely!"

"I believe you'd like to live in the Midi," she opined sagely.

I nodded.

"Then come with me to the Atlantic: it's better for you."

"Right, O Queen of my Heart. I will follow you to the ends of the earth."

"Let's get back to civilisation."

"Where's that?"

"Biarritz, for instance."

Helen is a shrewd child. It flashed across me that her talk about the Atlantic was only a pre-amble: what she really wanted was a street of fashionable shops.

"What do you say?" she asked.

"Nothing. It merely struck me as being a long way round."

"To Biarritz?"

"To Biarritz," I echoed with meaning.

"But you agree?"

"The ends of the earth are farther than Biarritz—and just about as empty as it is at this time of the year. Have I not promised to follow you even to the ends of the earth?"

"Good old boy!" Helen kissed me in full sight of the town of Pau: and at that moment broke the sound of distant thunder.

"It will always be thunder at Biarritz," mused Helen, with a far-away look in her eyes.

"Of the bargain counter?" I asked tritely.

"Of the sea," she replied. "I really did mean that part of the conversation."

"Let's go," she added, "before the storm comes on."

The storm, as it happened, hung all night to the line of the Pyrenees: and as the early morning train, which Helen forced me into taking, skirted their bases, the roar of the wheels—it seemed a sort of triangular roar—kept up its refrain of "Biarritz, Biarritz, Biarritz."

"I know what it's saying to you," I remarked to Helen.

"What?"

"'Shops again, shops again, shops again.'"

Helen turned up her nose in reply. But I knew I was right.

Biarritz, in the dead season, proved more than depressing; the shops, after all, were disappointing; only the sea, with its pillows of old lace foam for the incoming breakers to fall on, claimed our hearts.

"We go North by the side of the thunderwater," commanded Helen, her hair streaming in the Atlantic wind.

II

WHEN I had written thus far, I took my manuscript on to a beach where I could be quite alone. I wanted to think: and to do that one must have no living thing near by to offer itself for speculation. Even Helen, dear girl, would have been in the way at the moment. That is why I chose this beach in Biscay: it was the most solitary spot I could find.

It was part of the Landes—of what might have been a French Sahara, had not pines arrested the encroachment of the sand. They were intensely silent as I walked down the fragrant lane towards the shore, pine needles forming a resilient bed for

the feet, the senses instinctively quickening as in expectation. The trees themselves seemed alert but so dignified as to avoid outward display of emotion. To another they might have appeared melancholy in their deeply mottled light and shade—there was a monotonous regularity in their forms, and in the rows of earthenware cups, shaped like flowerpots, which caught the resin from their scarred barks. I counted these cups as they lined the road: fifty-six of them I could see, each half-full, before the pine-needle path topped the hill, changed to sand, and trickled down to the wide seashore.

Just as the path reached the crest, light broke through the pines—above, the light of a clear blue sky intensified by the greenly curved mass of the trees; below, a pale silver mist through which it was difficult to identify anything. Gradually the forest melted away: a solitary wizened tree-stump braved the rigours of the western wind, a few tufts of coarse yellow-green grass, scattered hillocks of sterile sand, the silver mist rising to meet us; and behind it, the long rolling breakers of the Atlantic on a calm day.

I had come out with the intention of slaughtering most of what I had written: the rough, wood-built hut, in which I had spent the night, seemed the epitome of a life too rigorous and stern to exist side by side with the fluent, full-blooded life of the Midi. Had I made a mistake in writing as I had done? Was it not a chimera, a mirage, a foolishly false hope, to suppose that men lived thus when here, within a few miles of them, life was so drab, so lacking in every richness they possessed? I had seen life where wine ran easily: but could men even thus afford to be indolent and happy-go-lucky for the morrow?

I thought of Étienne, of Olga, of Mimi, of Anton

Peresc, each as a type which differs from its prototype with us—the adventurer bolder, the victim more pathetic, the young more innocent, the taciturn more brusque, the boor less suave even than in England. Yet what vast tracks of their minds were similar in all respects to ours; what hopes and fears were common to us both; how many experiences we could share and find points of contact.

But, I considered, what Englishman would have shown his emotion as did Napoléon Bax of Bordeaux when Marcus ate his papers? Along all this southern coast, emotion, mood, was the chief event of life. . . .

True, but I was forgetting my geography. There was yet a hope that the Midi, which had so captivated our imagination, was the true France. Bordeaux, a third of the way up the western coast, had confirmed it.

Yet again I wondered how to reconcile Bax with these desolate Landes. The Midi was all exuberance, toned with indolence by the fierceness of the sun: there was neither exuberance nor indolence here. In the Bay of Biscay there was not room for both lotus eating and the white toothed Atlantic. . . .

Slowly—very slowly—there rose out of the silver mist a figure plodding its way along the shore, and faintly—very faintly—a voice arose, mingled with the slow pulsation of the sea. Figure and voice appeared blurred by the two fierce elements; and then, as if after a struggle, dominated them—the figure of an immensely stout man of jovial countenance, a French Falstaff, clad in the dark blue of a fisherman, trolling forth a song which seemed a version of the song sung by the pines and the breakers on stormy nights, full of sibilants and hisses and long mournful vowels, rising in crescendos and falling again into an angry confused murmur.

As he approached me, he ceased to sing. Placing his arms akimbo, he stared at my full length dusted over by yellow sand.

"*Bonjour, M'sieu,*" he cried heartily.

"It is a fine day," I answered by way of opening conversation.

"A nice south wind," he replied deliberately, "but it will change soon to the west."

"And that means——?"

"Storm, M'sieu. Or at least bad weather"—and then, after a pause: "I go out to-night—out there. But that doesn't matter." He jerked his arm beyond the white breakers.

"And so you sing——?" I suggested.

"To think of other things. It is no use to think about bad weather: not if you want to enjoy life."

"And life is meant to be enjoyed?"

"*Sacré nom!*" He clapped his hands—"here is a moralist!"

"By no means," I answered. "Where I have been, in the South, that is the orthodox creed."

"I should think so. But in the South they have no Biscay to trouble them. Go back to them, M'sieu, and take them what you find around you to-night."

He doffed his cap, and resuming his song, struck inland on the path by which I had reached the shore.

"I sing to think of other things. . . ."

". . . they have no Biscay to trouble them."

The phrases kept repeating themselves.

Perhaps it was Nature that was responsible for the enthusiastic, emotional, excitable temperament of Napoléon Bax—to make him think of other things. They in the South had their charming indolence, their *naïveté*, their rich humour, their serene confidence that everything would go

right somehow. In Nice there was the Angels' Bay—not a Biscay to trouble them.

I returned with my manuscript untouched. You must take these sketches as you find them.

III

IN Dax, the little railway junction from which southward bound trains branch to Spain on the one hand and to the Pyrenean resorts on the other—a town which the descriptive Frenchman calls "*une ville coquette*"—there was a couple who fitted in with my mood. They laughed—to make them think of other things.

The past had not been kind to Henri and Madeleine Capdepuy. Only two months after their marriage the father of Henri had died leaving his invalid mother dependent on him; within a week Madeleine's mother had died also. Before that, her two brothers had been killed and Henri had left the army battered but "whole"—as completeness goes in these days. A few weeks ago Henri, troubled by a persistent and, I fear, neglected cough, reluctantly visited the doctor. "Consumption," he feared. Even that was not the worst.

It would have been bearable if Henri and Madeleine had decided to live out their lives alone. But soon there would be three of them. . . .

"Jean will be a strong boy," Madeleine told Helen one day—it will be observed that she had already decided upon a son. "We shall not put him to work in his father's boot shop: that is a bad life for one so healthy as he will be. We shall give him a good education—we shall have been able to save money by that time—and then I hope he will go in for motoring. It is more in the open air. You see, I have thought it all out."

She laughed shyly, but already with a mother's pride, as she said this; and then, Helen told me, there came into her face a look so scared that her whole body trembled. Abruptly she turned, ran into the little room they rented behind the shop and began feverishly sewing at a tiny garment while she hummed a brave tune.

"Of course I do not trouble for myself," said Henri with a shrug of his shoulders. "The doctor says I may be cured soon. . . . But for Jean it is a different matter, *parbleu*. Suppose he . . . well, what will he think of us then?"

"Perhaps," I began——

"Yes, perhaps, I know. But just look what these books say——" and he reached down from the shelf three or four well-thumbed medical manuals from which he read long-winded extracts. How I hated those books! His faith, supporting that of his wife, would have been worth all the science in the world. But he was unwittingly leaving her to make her fight alone.

"Henri reads a lot of silly books," she told Helen on another occasion, "but I won't let him read them to me. I won't believe them—I won't! They're wicked books. . . ."

The Capdepuys shared a yard with us—their window looked into ours—and it was thus natural that we should become friendly. It was natural, too, that we should learn not only their routine but some of the tremendous trivialities of their daily lives which they intended to keep to themselves: with the best will in the world it was unavoidable. We could see Henri at night, when the sun had sunk, and it was no longer possible, after the closing of the shop, for him to hang about the yard in his shirt-sleeves, poring over these medical books, his hair ruffled and, once at least, with tears on his cheeks.

Then Madeleine entered the room unnoticed. Quietly approaching, she put her arms over his shoulders, her face very close to his.

"My dear," she seemed to say, "don't read that nonsense any more. What difference can it make, when little Jean is going to be so healthy?"

At any rate he smiled and tossed the books into a corner. Together they sat holding hands, speaking earnestly. . . .

At six o'clock every morning the long shutters of their room would be flung open by Henri in *négligé*; and soon after, the shrill, though not unmusical, voice of Madeleine would brighten the bright morning. Then the shop, with its spick and span boots, its dainty chairs and foot-rests, its show cases, its polished pay-desk, its glass doorway on which the name of Capdepuy was engraved in big curved letters—all this would have to be dusted and swept and polished before it was ready for customers at eight.

Then Madeleine would rest, going leisurely about her housework, or sit at the pay-desk for a time. Déjeuner, a simple affair, was snatched when it might be—Henri considered the midday closing, prevalent all through the South of France, an indolent habit—and during the afternoon Madeleine lay down on the bed and learned English.

"I must be interested in something," she insisted. "And besides, I want Jean to know English."

Then she would take charge of the shop for a little time, while Henri ran to the café across the road—his white apron made an alluring patch of cool colour there—to have his glass of wine and chat with his cronies. At seven or thereabouts, the shop shut; there was a huge banging of doors and noisy setting to rights of the furniture, excited balancing of books, gusty laughs from Henri and trills and giggles from Madeleine. Then the yard

in shirt-sleeves, while Madeleine sat by and sewed ; soup ; and bed.

The persistent cough which accompanied Henri appeared Madeleine's only anxiety. Sometimes from the little room behind the shop, she would stop her work and listen ; shrug her shoulders ; continue with a hard little laugh that did not reach her eyes.

In his spare moments Henri tended a tiny plot of ground, not because he was an enthusiastic gardener but because, as he explained ruefully, "money becomes shorter as one's purse gets longer." Yet he grew, in spite of himself, to be interested.

"Look at that fine cauliflower," he exclaimed to us one day. "Such a trouble I had with it. You see, when it was young I somehow took a fancy to it, poor weakling that it was. We were both interested in it, Madeleine and I. We reared it ever so carefully—and look at it now."

A couple of children were Henri and Madeleine, and child-like, had put all their eggs in one basket. Their entire capital was in the boot-shop and their small earnings were kept locked in the till. One morning the blow fell.

Henri's tousled head had opened the shutter for his first breath of morning air, when some vagary or other led him into the shop. For a second he stood rooted to the ground. Then, deliberately, he walked, clad as he was only in his night-gown, over to our window.

"May I have a word with you ?" His voice sounded curiously tremulous.

I jumped out of bed.

"We have been robbed," he said. "How can I tell Madeleine ?"

"Tell her as gently as you can," I suggested. "My wife will see to the rest."

Helen spent most of the day with Madeleine

while Henri and I, with the aid of useless policemen, assessed the loss. It had been, it seemed, a pretty complete haul ; not only money, but stock, had been taken away through a hole made to lead into a side passage. Henri went about in a repentant mood as if he alone had been responsible. " I could not get insured," he apologised, " they want such high premiums nowadays. Before the war I might have afforded it, but then it did not seem worth while."

In the evening we sat with them ; a gloomy party at first. Then Madeleine said suddenly :

" We have a lot left, Henri,"

He did not at first catch her meaning, but laughed bitterly.

" I've been thinking. With care he will still be able to go to the Lycée ; and there are lots of big motor works who will be glad to have such a promising boy. Besides, I shall have taught him good English . . ."

She laughed ; and it was the way in which she did it that made the rest of the evening happy.

XII

THE INNOCENCE OF ARCACHON

I

"Go to Arcachon if you like sea-bathing," Henri told me. "In summer it is calm, with sand and little boats"—he spread out one hand and rippled the other over the air in vivid imitation.

Not being attracted by the mud-baths of Dax, I had sighed for a further glimpse of the sea. Leaving Helen to look after Madeleine for a few days, I shouldered my pack and set off northward along the straight flat roads of the Landes.

A companionless tramp is, however, a most depressing form of enjoyment. No one seemed to be going my way. I could see my destination almost before I started, and as the pine trees slowly passed, I did the foolish thing and began to count them. The long road seemed to close in about me and over me and hundreds of mosquitoes swarmed into my clothes. The villages in which I wanted to spend the night had little or no accommodation—I "rested," here on a table, there in an outhouse. The joys of sea-bathing danced constantly in front of me; and on the third day I grew so miserable at the slow progress I was making that I wired to Helen to join me. She, I knew, would cheer me up. I met her at the station, and very soon we were alongside the big sand dunes that lead to Arcachon.

Immediately we arrived at the inland lake on which Arcachon stands, I knew I had seen it before.

That long expanse of flat shore, reedy near the edges, those undulating hillocks in the distance, grey under a grey sky, those high prowed boats with squat sails and containing little dots of colour I knew to be men, that peaceful, almost unripppling surface of lake—all were familiar. They were parts of the Venetian lagoon as I had seen it one rainy Easter, transported bodily into France. One expected to hear a Venetian boating song floating dreamily from the grey ; it was a gramophone in a motor yacht that brought me back to the reality of a French watering-place.

Yet surely there was never such a watering-place as Arcachon. Although it is to Bordeaux very much what Southend is to London, it is the most innocent place in the world. All the oyster fishermen and some of the fisherwomen too—and there are hundreds of each—laze about the town in crimson trousers turned up to the knee, and in blue tunics, the women in pleated black bonnets which project on either side like blinkers—can you imagine this at Southend ? More than half the bedrooms at Arcachon open directly on to the street by means of French windows, which are always flung wide : yet never a theft is committed. If you have not change in Arcachon, the shopkeepers tell you to bring it at your own convenience. The animals are, strangely enough for France, friendly and unafraid, as if they knew that cruelty could not live in that atmosphere ; the swallows skim along the main street of the town scarcely a foot above the ground, unmolested by the small boy tribe. Because, perhaps, most of the juvenile natives are already busy about their fathers' business on the oyster beds and all the young visitors are amusing themselves on the sands.

They enjoy themselves immensely, do the youngsters, for Arcachon seems a place built for children by children. The little villas in the Ville d'Été are

like dolls' houses, with their red roofs and brightly-painted walls: those in the Ville d'Hiver, among the pine trees, are like dolls' houses too, but more expensive ones for rich sophisticated children to play in. The hotels, with neat lawns in front of them, are as prim and as wild as the children playing in their brightly-coloured holiday clothes, while fond parents gaze from the shelter of bathing tents and sew, read or sleep. I even saw two immaculate Frenchmen building sand castles. . . .

The tide retreats a long way from the promenade, leaving an immense stretch of sand, and, in its narrow channel, a current that would try the powers of an experienced swimmer. Both of us being modest exponents of the art, we were forced into the comparative peace of high tide. And it did not take us long to discover that high tide on the day of our arrival was at perfectly absurd hours of the evening and morning. No bathing for a day or two. We settled down resignedly to wait.

An English couple, young, athletic, and with the severely business-like appearance which distinguishes Englishmen the world over, attracted our attention. Helen was for opening conversation.

"No," I said. "Let's wait to see whether they speak first."

We met them in the town, on the beach and among the pines. We sat next to them at a café. That they wanted to speak was obvious: they would watch us even as we watched them—and yet they remained silent. Once, on leaving the café, I bade them a good-day. There was no response.

"You are a queer people, you English," said a little Frenchman with whom I sat on the beach—he was a silk merchant of Lyons, I believe—"at home you are courteous, hospitable, everything that is kind: abroad you are like cats about to fight."

"They say," I told him, "that it requires an accident to bring English people together."

"An accident—or a cup of tea," he replied.

Then I remembered that it was coffee we had called for.

As soon as the tide had adjusted itself to our wish for a midday bathe, the weather changed. For a whole day the rain fell as though the heavens had opened; the next day was cold, the following warmer, but dull and overcast. Very few people had ventured previously into the water; now there were none. They looked disconsolately at the lapping tide, with its fringe of seaweed and oyster shells; came bravely down from the hotels and villas, a few of them, in resplendent bathing costumes wrapped round in a towel-like dressing-gown; and having sufficiently exhibited themselves to the admiring public, hurried back, to jump thankfully into warm clothes.

But the bedroom windows of Arcachon still stood open to the street, and the swallows skimmed along the Boulevard de la Plage. And as for the sand children—they were on the beach as though nothing in the world could disturb them.

II

OUR landlady, when first we sought rooms in a little café near the centre of the town, had looked at us queerly. She seemed to be measuring us.

"*M'sieu est anglais ?*" she asked.

"*Bon.*"

The bedroom she put at our disposal was on the ground floor—typical of the innocence of Arcachon—at the back of the café and opened on to a garden shared with three other houses. The room was the second of a row of four, faced by a trellis of hops, blocking out the direct sunlight but affording shade and comfort during the heat of the day. A passage

between the trellis and the house wall gave the only access to all four rooms.

"You must let me know at once if you are not comfortable," she said, with a faint trace of anxiety in her voice.

Cleanliness, at least, was assured though cosiness seemed but a remote possibility. The polished woodwork of the fittings and the ungracious hardness of the chairs made the room appear as steely as a knife-blade. It looked cold in the midst of the rich evening glow, virginal.

Being healthily tired, we went to bed early. I was on the point of dropping off to sleep when Helen shook my arm.

"There's a dog at the door," she said.

I "shoo'd" violently; then got out of bed and lit the lamp. There was nothing.

"Must have been next door?" I grunted.

About half an hour later Helen exclaimed:

"There he is again. Inside the room, this time."

I repeated my performance, with the same result. I partly closed the door by a chair.

For the third time Helen heard the dog. I heard him myself—a big brute, he sounded, heavy and deliberate of tread. He entered the door, snuffed round the walls, shuffled against the furniture, breathing heavily, and occasionally giving a tiny whine as if in distress.

I jumped out of bed and struck the match I had placed ready.

For the third time there was nothing.

So I shut the door, went to sleep and woke up next morning with a headache.

We looked carefully during the day for any sign of a dog about the place but there was none. That night, too, though our windows were open to their fullest, we were undisturbed.

On the third night, he came again—the same

heavy tread, shuffling against the furniture, distressed whining. When I lit the lamp the sound ceased.

We left it alight with the windows still open and listened. It seemed as if our visitor had left us.

Then, softly, we heard him coming along the passage—distant at first, but gradually approaching. He was crying to himself, poor devil, and panting between the sobs. "He must be very old," I thought, "to have so much difficulty in walking a short distance. Or perhaps he has been keeping a constant vigil all night."

The sound of his feet drew opposite our door but no patient eyes and lolling tongue accompanied it. It entered the room, and as it came near a chair . . . the chair moved . . . ever so slightly . . . but moved. . . .

Helen clutched my arm.

"Goodness gracious!" she whispered convulsively.

I was not in the mood at the moment to make any reply.

The sound scraped along the opposite wall, bumped up against our knapsacks, and then turned the corner. It was approaching the bed. . . .

I seized my stick—a heavy one, with an inch of good steel at the end . . . but one cannot hit a sound.

"Do you see anything?" I whispered to Helen, for her eyes were starting out of her head.

"No," she jerked back.

The sound continued to approach. It was very near the bed.

"Do something!" Helen was almost hysterical.

I had the alternatives of putting my head under the clothes in one convulsive bolt, or flinging myself out of bed. Fortunately, I did the latter.

The sound ceased immediately.

The next morning I had a frank talk with the landlady.

"I am sorry," she said apologetically. "I thought that, being English, you wouldn't mind."

"I'm sorry to lower your estimate of my countrymen," I replied, "but we do."

"You shall have another room," she said. . . .

"He belonged to my husband," she told us during the day, "who had had him for years. His name was Dique—as fine a dog as any man could want—and knowing. . . .

"One time, we had a lodger whom my husband didn't trust. I don't know why ; but men at times have these feelings about one another. Dique didn't trust him either. Dique would growl or sulk whenever this lodger came by. At night he would prowl up and down outside his door. One night, when the lodger had been here about a week, Dique went into his room. The brute of a man shot him. Poor Dique. I think he still looks everywhere for my husband—just as my husband is always looking for poor old Dique."

"And the room," I ventured.

"Was the one you slept in, M'sieu. However, you will be comfortable enough to-night."

But that remained to be seen.

III

IF you are a squeamish person, you will be well advised to omit this story of why we left Arcachon to look after itself and hurried to a hot bath to Bordeaux.

From the very first night in the new room we wished to be back in the old. The phantom dog was preferable to the visitors who awaited us.

"Do you really think it was true ?" asked Helen, alluding to Dique.

"Don't know," I replied. "I only know that this is," and I scratched violently.

It was They who pestered us with their attentions. I have seen enlarged models of Them in museums, but none gives an adequate idea of Their ferocity.

Our life became a perpetual hunt and little mountain ranges, not in Nature's original plan, appeared on our bodies.

"We must do something about it," exclaimed Helen.

So we bathed. They seemed to enjoy the salt water. I scoured the village for a disinfectant and we washed in it. They licked their chops and bit the more merrily.

One day we searched the mattress—a tremendously thorough search, which left nothing to be discovered. We found no trace.

"It must be heat spots," I suggested. The explanation was obviously ridiculous but served to soothe our ruffled tempers. For a day it made us almost amiable.

I suggested a bath to the landlady. She looked surprised and brought us a small jug of tepid water.

"Have you nothing larger?" I asked.

"There is the sea," she replied without sarcastic intention.

I looked round the café buildings.

"Have you never had a bath here?" I queried.

"Not since the Etablissement des Bains was built; they took ours away."

I was reminded of a dialogue between a traveller and a hotel servant in the Rhone Valley.

TRAVELLER: I should like a bath, please.

SERVANT: When does M'sieu want it?

T.: Now, to be sure.

S.: But M'sieu must give two days' notice, so that we can fetch the bath.

T. : Good Heavens ! And you call this the Hôtel des Bains ! Why, I wonder ?

S. : Because, M'sieu, it is built on the site of the Roman baths.

We had to content ourselves with the perfectly useless tepid water ; some foolish English reticence prevented us from telling our landlady that her room was flea-ridden. We didn't want to appear faddy.

" You see," remarked Helen reminiscently, " it seems to be the rule out here."

" Except where the English have taught 'em better," I answered.

Not even in the Army did I sigh more strongly for home comforts. Helen's experiences in hospitals and at munition factories paled before those at Arcachon.

Still They came. Processions of Them, which refused to diminish. Had it been in a worthier cause, such perseverance would have been exemplary.

" Let's move to another room," cried Helen vehemently.

Then came the discussion as to what other room we should go to. When we first entered this one it had appeared so polished, so free from any sort of dust, that to have thought of Them would have seemed desecration.

Our faith in Arcachon was undermined. Might not any room prove a similar hot-bed ? Might not every person we met contaminate us further ? What about the English couple ? Had a nervous consciousness of their own state prevented them from speaking ? Such endless possibilities were opened up . . .

" There is only one thing to do," said Helen.

" To clear out altogether."

" To Bordeaux ? "

I nodded.

" To a big hotel with hot water in every room, with baths you can drown yourself in and bath

towels that smother you, with electric light and electric fans and . . . and . . . everything that's nice," concluded Helen lamely.

"A good idea," I agreed. "But you're going it somewhat."

"Anything to be rid of them," exclaimed Helen. "It is worth all the treasure of the Incas."

In a few hours we were on our way to Bordeaux ; in a few more hours you might have heard splashes and gurgles and sounds of subdued joy from two bath-rooms on the second floor.

I told you this was an unpleasant story. But it is perfectly true, as you may find for yourself if you go to Arcachon ; and you will admit that it has a happy ending.

XIII

WINE WATER AND SAND

I

Brits of England seem to have crept into the Médoc—the great triangular vineyard north of Bordeaux bounded on the one side by the Gironde and on the other by the sea. No one could mistake the flat, yellow-red roofed villages with their immense churches or the perfectly straight roads, like rockets shooting to the far horizon, or the forests of fir and the blue-sprayed vineyards, for anything but French. They cry out to you in unmistakable language that they are the Médoc, the country of Château Lafite, and of other glowing wines. The curious double-decked train, its upper compartments reached by stairs like the top of an omnibus and often stuffy with the heavy smoke of the engine, positively puffs its nationality. But in spite of it all there is a feeling that the train and the villages and the firs and the vineyards—even the roads—are not telling the whole truth. There is something in addition—something familiar and rich and homely, usually absent from the landscapes of France.

Not very far from Bordeaux, the French train runs through an English forest—a forest of oak and elm with spaces of quiet green meadows and winding overgrown streams. Every now and then a glade opens, and you see deep into the mottled sunlight of the place—a bank of simple flowers, a mossy hillock, a green pool. Or a giant elm, beneath

which nestles a cottage, recalls the beauties of the Southern Midlands, the park lands of Northampton and North Bucks. To Helen it was a glimpse of home.

But here it is all on the flat, as if planted on a billiard table; vines, too, break the dream; you return to it only with the potato fields. Some artist has said that the most beautiful sight one could wish to see is a field of cabbages in the evening sun; fields of potatoes in France run it close. There are acres upon acres of them in the Médoc, casually interspersed with maize and other crops. They make you feel homesick; you conjure up a stolid English agricultural labourer working unhurryingly in their midst.

" . . . well, sur, the guv'nor due expect a fair crop this yuur, so Oi've 'eered 'ee sai, but some raieren'ud due a foine lot twaerds it, Oi'm thinkin' . . ."

Or again, the cherry trees, little masses of crimson against the green and brown. The guard on the train enjoyed himself immensely with them. At every station he ran along the line, gathered a cap-full of the best and returned to the passengers (female) who had been watching the operation.

" For Mad'm'selle," he would say gallantly, and climbing up the footboard, tip the ripe load into her hands. Then back went the cap on his head and he into his van, and the little train snorted once more to the next station, where the service would be repeated.

" I wonder if he considers it part of his duty," said Helen somewhat tartly. She was thirsty and he had passed her by.

" Perhaps the tree was his," I suggested, watching another cap-full being bestowed elsewhere.

" They can't all belong to him."

" To the railway company, then, for the benefit of passengers ! "

Helen sniffed. "I don't believe he's any right to do it, any way," she said.

"Plenty of sour grapes about if you'd like some," I remarked.

Helen lapsed into indignant silence.

Suddenly the landscape changes. The forests, the vines, the potato fields, disappear as if they had been part of a cinematograph film which had come to the end of the reel. Wooded marshy lands with cattle deep in the lush grass—like the Essex or Rye marshes—take their place. And then you see for the first time the pine-covered sand dunes.

As a matter of fact, they have been following you all the way up from Arcachon, even from Biarritz—nearly two hundred miles of them, stern and heartless, supporting little life, irresistibly as waves of the sea. At Soulac here in front of us, they entirely buried a church in the eighteenth century, and as the wave of sand moved on, left it high and dry again, its stone polished as though it had been newly built. These encroachments have been partially stopped by the pine forests; but in the spaces between the trees the sand is still imperceptibly drifting. Perhaps, one day, it will bury the forests; for in parts the dunes are over two hundred feet in height.

And beyond the sand, the sea, encroaching too; nothing seems permanent along this coast. It has swallowed up the harbour of Soulac altogether, and an old Roman town; a lighthouse, which now stands five or six miles out, was once on the mainland. The sand makes way for the sea; the sea makes way for more sea; the rivers contribute towards the swelling of the sea and the deposits of further sand. What a sterile circle Nature sometimes provides for our entertainment.

Soulac, however, watches this entertainment with

equanimity. The sand and the sea are its *raison d'être*. A few small villas, a ramshackle hotel, a few shops—that is all there is of Soulac ; but it looks out on to the broad ocean with a smile. For as long as the sand and sea remain, people will flock to it. At Soulac the sands are golden—Shakespeare's "yellow sands"—spacious and flat and cleanly ; the sea, when it is calm, can scarcely work itself into a ripple. It is only behind Soulac that the sands of death accumulate ; those before it are the sands of life, which, far from running out, as the moralists would have it, stick to the fingers in warm, sunlit joy, and laugh and sparkle like the red wine of Médoc when the sun goes down into the west. The sterile circle, apparently, has its compensations.

If you watch carefully, you can see the shore being cleared by Nature's scavenging department. Millions of scavengers there are, all hopping before the rising tide like a vast ballet, fastening upon dead or unclean matter and devouring it—little land shrimps, colourless as glass, living between high and low water mark, whose duty in life is to keep fresh the beach for their mistress, the sea. A chivalrous life, one would think, like a Sir Walter Raleigh, perpetually spreading his cloak for his Queen to walk over ; inglorious yet finer, for they are such very humble courtiers. And how meanly are they repaid by the alliance of sea and sand, sterile and cruel. Yet it is not theirs to question, but to cleanse. They at sea and beetles in the sand, born to serve greed and destruction. . . .

Has cleanliness, after all, anything to do with Godliness ?

II

It was at Soulac that we ran against Napoléon Bax again. He had a villa there, to which, he explained, his wife would be coming later. He himself had

snatched a holiday when it offered, and for the moment the Luz Electricity Scheme could wait. He had only just arrived and was full of enthusiasm. He walked with every muscle of his little body, his beard stuck out with prodigious energy, his creased face was lighted by a boyish smile. He trotted up to us and kissed us on both cheeks.

"My dear friends," he cried jubilantly, "my very dear friends. This is indeed a joy!"

He wrung our hands.

"Luz—Soulac," he cried. "Indeed the world is small!"

And then he unconsciously hit below the belt at the solar plexus of our guilt.

"How's the donkey?" he enquired amiably.

"Gone," replied Helen, in a tone which implied the close of the conversation.

"Never!" ejaculated Bax. "Gone—dead, you mean?"

"Sold. Monsieur, we have a confession to make. It was Marcus who ate your plans."

M. Bax looked stupefied for some seconds, and then said:

"*Nom de nom*, it is incredible! Such a beast is worth his weight in gold. What knowledge he contains!"

"I don't suppose we got even the value of the paper for him," I remarked.

"That was a bad bargain, then," replied Bax seriously. "We must try to strike a better one. Come and dine with me this evening."

His villa contained only three small rooms, and where he managed to store all his wine was a mystery.

"You must look in the sand," he told us in jest; but I believe that, had we chosen to dig up his enclosed patch of garden, we should have found the jest to have been earnest. He was a connoisseur

in wines and intimate with some of the most influential growers of the Médoc. A pronounced strain of economy running through him, he would surely have seen the value of cool, shaded sand (his garden was closely surrounded by pine trees) as an admirable wine cellar—as long, that is, as it remained secret.

“You must bathe with me to-morrow,” he exclaimed as we sat later on the little verandah. “It is early yet, of course, but I believe in vigour and rigour for the body.”

It was then at the end of June !

We appeared from our lodgings at midday in scanty bathing apparel, with towels thrown round our shoulders, and found M. Bax fussily superintending the erection of a beach tent.

“You will catch cold,” he cried anxiously.

We repudiated the suggestion, saying that the one thing we feared was sunstroke, but he insisted on lending us warm wraps. Meanwhile, the tent having been erected, Bax drew the curtains and amid much puffing, blowing and snatches of song proceeded to undress. He emerged some minutes later in a resplendent claret-coloured costume with the initials “N.B.” blazoned in royal blue on the chest. Around himself he had wrapped an enormous towel.

“I am ready,” he cried, letting the tent curtains drop dramatically behind him.

Still wrapped in his towel, he made his way to the water’s edge ; let it fall as an Emperor might have let fall his purple ; and, with a look of determination, advanced towards the sea.

M. Bax was not a swimmer. He explained that beyond the breakers—some of them quite eighteen inches in height—there were strong currents. Also there were jellyfish of monstrous proportions ; he pointed out one or two dead ones already on the

beach, and they were unpleasant to look upon. Again, the Luz Electricity Scheme——

M. Bax, therefore, was taking no risks.

He lay at nearly full length in just enough water to cover him, and carefully removing his head and beard from the sphere of operations, allowed the incoming waves to fall on to his bulk. That this pleased him was evident ; he smiled benignly on as much of the world as he could see, nodded familiarly to a passing acquaintance on the beach—one expected him to light a cigarette and placidly inhale it.

For about five minutes he lay thus, and then, solemnly rising, stalked to his towel and disappeared into his tent.

When Helen and I had finished disporting ourselves, we made our merry way towards our companion. He met us with a glass of red wine for each.

“An excellent preventative against cold,” he remarked sagely, and forced us to drink it.

Red wine and sea water are not the best *apéritif* to a healthy meal.

We lay recuperating in his tent most of the afternoon, while Bax strolled about the beach, collecting shells for his “museum.” To the best of my belief, he forgot them when the tent was struck and they lie there to this day ; he had commenced one of his interminable disquisitions on the Luz Electricity Scheme.

With bathing, lying on the beach, talking electricity, we passed several pleasant days. One afternoon Bax approached me at a trot. I knew something was “in the wind.”

“M. Chatillon is speaking here to-night,” he exclaimed excitedly.

“Indeed.”

“Yes, you must hear him ! A most eloquent speaker—vivid, humorous, pathetic, what you will. He will make you cry and laugh in the same breath.

The last time I heard him . . .”—and there followed a description so dramatic that he required most of the roadway to do it justice.

“But who is this M. Chatillon?” I asked innocently.

“*Mon Dieu*, he does not know Chatillon! Chatillon is a *Député*—a most learned man, a wise statesman, a cute politician, a man of affairs, a thorn in the side of the Government, a——”

I concluded that Bax and Chatillon were of the same political colour.

III

It appeared that M. Chatillon had, on a recent occasion, given a vote displeasing to his constituents. They were roused to a high pitch of indignation at what they considered a plain betrayal of their interests, and with an eye to the next election, M. Chatillon had to humble himself before them—“explain his position,” he called it—at a series of public meetings in towns and villages. That at Soulac promised to be good fun.

M. Bax, as a personage of some social standing, was asked to support the member, while the Mayor, an insignificant little man whose name I forget, took the chair with nervous impartiality. The village folk, enthusiastic politicians from more outlying villages, a few visitors, and even some ladies, crowded into the stifling café where the meeting was held. M. Chatillon did not forget the ladies.

The meeting was timed to start at nine o'clock; and by half-past seven the first traps and cycles had begun to arrive at the doors and disgorge their owners into the café, where they whiled away the time with many drinks and stronger discussions. As the room grew more and more crowded, it became plain that M. Chatillon was likely to enjoy an unkind reception, his supporters being few and timid, while

his opponents were rapidly warming to their work. They were already flashing the fire of righteous indignation, strong fists, furious eyes, high words, into the inoffensive faces of the Chatillon-ites, who had been driven into small parties in remote corners of the room, while they remained a solid block in the centre.

Soon after the appointed time, the Mayor, Chatillon and Bax—the last full of self-importance—entered the room amidst an ominous silence. A tentative cheer from the Chatillon-ites was quelled by the moral force of the surrounding stillness. The three took their places ; and immediately Chatillon rose again.

“*Mes amis*,” he said with a bland smile, “we do not want formal discussions here. This is a heart-to-heart talk between friends, and as such is best over a glass of wine. Order what you wish, messieurs, mesdames.”

Hubbub reigned for a few minutes, over which Chatillon cast the benign glance of a guardian angel. He lit a cigar, stroked his moustaches thoughtfully, nodded to his semi-exiled supporters, bowed to the wife of one of them, spoke cheerfully to an opponent—did all those things, in short, which it is tactful for a Member of the Chamber of Deputies to do in such circumstances.

When quiet had been restored and the room twinkled with the light of wine, the Mayor rose.

“Fellow citizens of Soulac,” he commenced nervously. “There is no need for me to recapitulate the history of what has led to the calling of this meeting ; it is well known by you all. Some of you approve of what our worthy Deputé has done ; others do not. It is far from my wishes to take the one part or the other. Those of you who are eager for an explanation will doubtless be enlightened ; those of you who come to applaud

our worthy *Député* will not have come in vain. It is not my intention to delay the meeting for more than a few moments while I . . ." (here followed the platitudinous twenty minutes in which a chairman indulges).

M. Chatillon rose affably; and his supporters, doubtless acting on a pre-arranged signal, broke into a storm of applause.

"My friends," commenced the Member. "You want to know the reasons for my vote. I will be blunt with you—I will put my case so convincingly that you cannot—even my bitterest opponents, gentlemen—cannot but be pacified. You have come to jibe; you will remain to applaud. You . . ."

"*Garçon, encore un vin,*" came suddenly from the centre of the room.

Chatillon beamed with positive approval at the interrupter.

"You will, when you have heard my explanation, feel that . . ."

"*Apportez-moi un bock.*"

"Feel with me that my vote was influenced only and entirely by the best interests of the *Médoc*."

There was a titter at this, but Chatillon ignored it.

"You will remember . . ." he continued.

"We remember much."

"But will *you* remember?" The two "voices" were both from the centre of the opposition.

"Ah, my good friends, Truchon and Lancret," cried M. Chatillon, wagging a fleshy forefinger in their direction, "it is you again, is it? You would do better to listen than to interrupt." (Derisive laughter.)

"It is you who will be listening soon," cried someone.

Step by step, Chatillon pluckily unfolded his defence, the opposition growing bolder and bolder. What he said was difficult to follow, for every now

and then he would launch into a torrent of invective, or swing himself up to the skies on a wave of fervid patriotism which interrupted the flow of his argument and gave the enemy ample cause to blaspheme—an opportunity of which full advantage was taken. “*Lâche*,” “*coquin*,” “*escroc*,” flew about the room like hornets. The Mayor appealed for order.

“Fellow citizens,” he cried, vehemently waving his hands, “words are being used which are not for the ears of ladies. *Mon Dieu*, no. I appeal to you for moderation.”

“Let the women go out, then,” advised a voice—advice upon which most of the ladies present acted. With the atmosphere thus cleared, the hornets increased in activity and numbers.

Chatillon at last sat down amid applause from his handful of supporters and terrific cheering—relief, possibly—from his opponents.

The meeting, the Mayor announced, was thrown open to other speakers.

Lancret and Truchon, who seemed prominent in the anti-Chatillon camp, were on their feet in an instant, each haranguing such of his followers as could hear him. A Chatillon-ite dared to interrupt; his life was spared owing to the personal intervention of the Member. The Mayor tried to restore order; he was howled down. Questions innumerable were plied, some of which Chatillon noted on a piece of paper. Songs were sung and their choruses shouted by the anti-Chatillon-ites. One by one, adherents of the Member disappeared for some reason or another through the door. Bax grew nervous, the Mayor distraught; only Chatillon appeared unmoved.

Presently the babel subsided somewhat, and M. Chatillon rose to make his reply. More torrents of invective, more patriotic outbursts, varied this time by gigantic statistics, which he seemed only

just to have recalled. Bax's eyes glowed in renewed confidence as the anti-Chatillon-ites sat mute before these astounding figures ; he made little ejaculations of admiration as the Député rolled them forth. At one point I caught the single word "*électricité*," and saw Bax clap his hands vociferously. M. Bax was in the seventh heaven of delight.

At the close, even before the Mayor or the anti-Chatillon-ites had had time to intervene, Bax was on his feet.

"A vote of confidence!" he shouted, swept away by his own enthusiasm. "Cheers for our Député!"

As one man the meeting rose and made for the platform. There was a deafening noise ; someone beside me said : "Good-bye, Chatillon !" The light went out.

I found myself in the fresh air with my watch showing 1.15 a.m.

"I wonder which part of the Médoc that meeting belongs to," I asked the stars, "wine, water, or sand?"

IV

FOUR or five miles from Soulac, and on the Gironde side of the Médoc, lies Le Verdon. For every ounce of Soulac's vivacity Le Verdon has two of utter remoteness. And by that curious irony of chance, which is called progress, if Bordeaux really decides to build the "*avant-port*," it so badly needs, it will probably choose Le Verdon for the site. The little fishing village will be, at one stroke, transformed into a busy harbour. But that is anticipating . . .

Though even now thrills of excitement run occasionally down the spine of Le Verdon at the thought of what the future may hold in store. The change would be so complete—a metamorphosis, compared with which that of the caterpillar and

the butterfly dwindles. Le Verdon looks aghast at the picture of its own greatness.

Imagine a village of one street, one café, one bar—a village whose inhabitants are mostly so destitute that at times they are scarcely able to buy the necessities of life, whose recreation is gossip and whose only means of livelihood is the precarious one of fishing—a village surrounded by marsh, battered by the violent seas which are frequent at the river mouth, scorched by sun in summer, flooded by the high tides of autumn and spring, deluged by rain in winter—imagine the prospect to such a village of the prosperity which trading brings. The Mayor, worthy citizen enough in other respects, pulls every string at his command (few and feeble though they be) to bustle the Bordeaux authorities into action; while they, doubtless, receive his persistent communications, headed grandiosely with the full title of “*Le Verdon-sur-Mer, arrondissement Lesparre, canton Saint Vivien, département de la Gironde,*” and smile indulgently at his fussiness. The Town Council swell themselves into imaginary importance; every member of the community throws in his weight in support . . . It is a great thing to have a Future . . .

For the present, however, Le Verdon remains as it has been for a century. A few wealthy folk from the vineyards have discovered the charm of its remoteness and have built villas near-by, but these are rarely occupied, and of no account to the villagers who continue to be born, live, love, quarrel, and die just as they did before the villas were thought of. If they do sometimes regard them, it is only with a kind of angry contempt for people who can waste so much space which others are sorely lacking. It is not an easy job to rear a family in two rooms, in which it is impossible to stand upright. So Le Verdon goes its way, and lets the villas go theirs.

Le Verdon's way lies either across the marshes to the river bay, in which the fishing boats are moored, and thence by the uneasy Gironde to the sea ; or else along the main street to the high-titled Café de la Renaissance, where the fisherman's favourite wine awaits him and his irritating tally is chalked up on the doorpost. Here he may pass the evening as he wishes, with but one restriction—for woebetide him if he in any way tarnishes the spotless cleanliness of the place. The Café de la Renaissance is the cleanest hostelry in France—the very tiles on the floor are polished daily—and Madame Veuve Roget has an eagle eye for offenders. Her patrons may get drunk with impunity and go home to beat their wives—that is a domestic affair with which she has no concern ; they may occasionally forget to pay their score and be let off with a reprimand—but no man repeats the offence of dirtying the floor or the chairs with boots or clothes. Whatever their wives may say, Madame Roget holds the whip hand with the men—the other bar is villainous, and only to be visited when one is inexorably determined on a bad head in the morning—so that Madame usually gets her way, and the Café de la Renaissance, at the end of the evening, is far more unimpeachable than the period its title commemorates.

The Café is the centre, physical and social, of Le Verdon—the only place any sensible man can visit. Sometimes, however, he brings his wife with him—on Sunday evenings, when the room is crowded with dancing couples jiggling their heavy bodies over the floor to the accompaniment of an accordeon. Madame Roget, as master—or mistress?—of the ceremonies, looks on benignly and dispenses refreshments—her severity is relaxed on Sunday in view of the general happiness—in view, also, of the fact that the other bar, which at one time set up dances

in competition, has been forced to abandon them (on the last attempt not a single couple turned up). She looks on as a conqueror and, I have heard, secretly helps the rascally proprietor of the rival bar occasionally to obtain some of the small luxuries of existence. She is one of the few inhabitants of Le Verdon who could afford such kindness.

She is, therefore, one of the least concerned with Le Verdon's future. I put it to her: "But it will make a great difference to you?"

"Yes," she agreed. "I shall go out of business. I do not want a town hotel—it gets so dirty."

"Le Verdon will all be dirty then."

"Well, I shall leave Le Verdon. My poor husband was lighthouse-keeper at the Pointe yonder—I could always retire to a little cottage near-by."

"But the men of Le Verdon would miss you," interposed Helen.

Madame regarded her scornfully.

"The men," she said, "don't talk to me about a man missing anyone for more than a week! The first time they are tipsy they won't be slow to tell how thankful they are that I and my clean habits have gone. Besides, they will not be the same men. These fellows think that Le Verdon's prosperity will mean their prosperity too. I'm not such a fool—these men will only be grovelling to new masters, or have been pushed out elsewhere, or have died through having to do some real work."

"At least they would miss the Sunday evening dances," I suggested.

"With a cinema here? Never! I know what this place will be if it becomes rich—it'll be full of mean men with no spirit."

"A curious development for fishermen," remarked Helen.

"These are not fishermen; they only play at it.

That is why they are poor, that is why they are always looking to someone else to make them rich. Le Verdon might as well remain as it is."

As may be imagined from this, Madame was more respected than loved in the ambitious village; the wine of the Médoc had not turned to water in her veins. If she had had the power, she would have made Le Verdon prosperous without waiting for Bordeaux's assistance; but so few men like work.

V

It was, as she had told me, at the Pointe de Grave, the northern extremity of the great triangle where the Gironde joins the sea, that Madame Roget's husband had been keeper of the lighthouse. A position of some responsibility, for the white-built Nouveau Phare is an important landmark to navigators—more important than the ancient Tour de Cordouan, which we had already seen from Soulac, standing several miles out. The manner in which he met his death I heard from a pilot, one of the few permanent inhabitants of the windy point.

"A good man was Roget," he told me. "It was a sad thing for us when he was killed—a sad thing for France, too, if only she had known it.

"As lighthouse-keeper, he was naturally friendly with ships, you know.

"Somewhere about May of '17, just after the submarine warfare had been intensified, Roget went one afternoon on board a steamer which had received orders to stop at the mouth of the river . . . bad tide, I believe. There was no question of his being wanted at the lighthouse for a few hours—although of course, it was never lighted during the war—so he rowed across to see his friends on board—he had known Captain Bidon for years; I am not certain that the two weren't at school together

. . . You see, I know the full story because I was there at the time.

"We had a good afternoon with Bidon who was a ready talker at all times and had had an exciting trip from South America. Just as Roget said: 'Well, I must be off now; there may be some messages,' a gun fired.

"We didn't take much notice of the first shot, because they were always practising at the fort here. But after two or three shots a second gun joined in.

" 'Hope they don't mistake your launch for a submarine,' laughed Bidon, as we came on deck.

"Roget smiled back, and then the smile faded . . . like the sun going behind a cloud. He pointed with his finger.

"The guns were firing like mad now . . . and at something real. No submarine had ever come so close to shore. . . .

"Suddenly, a row of bubbles appeared on the water, near the ship.

"Bidon threw up his hands and shouted a warning. Roget seemed fascinated by them—stood staring as they came nearer and nearer. Bidon pulled him away, but it was too late.

"A terrific explosion . . . the ship heeled over . . . and when the water subsided Roget was lying on the deck, trying to rise.

" 'I can't get up,' he moaned. 'I must go to the lighthouse. The man I left there . . .'

"Then he fainted. It was evident that the ship was sinking . . . his launch had been blown to atoms. . . . So we lowered a boat and tried to put him into it. It was difficult, because the crew was excited and Bidon, too, was injured.

"Roget's legs had been blown off . . . half-way to land he opened his eyes.

" 'Let's come for a walk,' he said, 'we've just

got a quarter of an hour before soup. I feel like a quiet stroll.'

"*Mon Dieu*, you should have seen us!—we were crying with fright already, and Roget's words made us worse. . . .

" 'What is the matter?' he asked gently. 'Don't you want to come? If not, we will sit in the café here, and have a glass. Only decide, because the soup will be ready soon.'

"We rowed hard, and Roget fell into a kind of stupor. Then he leant up on his elbow and commenced to shout 'Let go of my legs!' and swore that we were trying to drag him down to the bottom of the river. He would not be soothed: but when Bidon showed him his injured arm, Roget grew quiet again . . . I think it was a mistake to show him. . . .

" 'I remember now,' said Roget. 'I was a fool to talk of going for a walk.'

"He squirmed himself into a more or less comfortable position, and lay groaning.

" 'Will you tell her?' he said.

"A boat which had put out to meet us came alongside. Roget took no notice, although it was a friend who brought it. We were towed for the rest of the distance.

"A few metres from the shore Roget broke into a laugh. 'To think I wanted to walk!' Then he was quiet.

"When we came into the harbour some preparations had been made for our comfort. Bidon bent over Roget. 'Come, old friend,' he said, 'we are going to make you comfortable.'

"Roget stared at him, but did not answer.

" 'Just rouse yourself a minute,' said Bidon.

"A military doctor bustled up. 'What is the use of talking to him?' he said brusquely to Bidon, and covered Roget's face with a handkerchief.

“He was a good man was Roget, but the Pointe de Grave is small and France is very big. Perhaps people never even heard of him . . . a good man. . . .”

VI

THE Pointe de Grave has, however, seen history of which France, big as she is, has heard and applauded. A hundred and fifty years ago, in 1777, it was from here that Lafayette, the chivalrous young nobleman who was willing to risk his all for Liberty, looked the last on his native country before setting sail for the American War of Independence, and here that he landed again when the French Revolution claimed his courage some years later. Almost as if to return the compliment, it was at the Pointe that the first American troops set foot in Europe in 1916, and a monument to their solemn memory is now in course of erection.

The unfinished breakwaters which jut in many directions from the tree-clothed nose of the Pointe have seen, too, their share of tragedy. At all times, owing to the configuration of the land, the mouth of the Gironde is turbulent, and often the enormous breakers of Biscay make confusion worse confounded so that those who work on the breakwaters do so in peril of their lives. The last of an appalling series of disasters to these unsung heroes was in 1914, when a party of French soldiers engaged in constructing another *rampe* were, everyone of them, hurled to death by the seas. Since then the breakwater has remained deserted : but it is crowded with the evidence of their devotion and courage.

XIV

THE FASHION OF ROYAN

ROYAN, on the northern bank of the Gironde opposite the Pointe de Grave, is one of the most fashionable watering places in France, a summer resort of Riviera shopkeepers. The season was not yet in full swing when we crossed to it in a ramshackle motor boat, but the town was rapidly filling with men just a little too spick and span in their open shirts to be really comfortable and women a trifle too underclad to be entirely wholesome.

Tents were springing up on the beach and for entertainment we watched fashionable bathing—M. Bax's performance at Soulac paled in comparison. It was so very mincing and refined and delicate—so very lacking in zest and heartiness and earnestness and all that makes anything worth doing. But it is the fashion and must be followed.

"Rather sad when one comes to that," I said to Helen, pointing out a fragrant flower of young manhood delicately clad in perfectly fitting costume, and languidly advancing over the sand.

Helen nodded. "Fool," she answered tersely.

"But I suppose he has his uses."

"Such as ?"

"A warning to others."

"Is he worth even that ?"

"Depend upon it, sir, God thinks twice before damning a man of that quality.' Possibly he has his good points."

"Well covered from the elements though," retorted Helen. "If they met a breeze they might blow away."

He was the sort of young man very popular at Royan. His face expressed little beyond amiable boredom, his conversation (for later we were compelled to overhear it) nothing beyond platitudes. One felt about him that

"His coat was brushed, his face was washed,
His shoes were clean and neat;
And this was odd, because, you know,
He hadn't any feet."

He hadn't any feet that were of use to him: no solid base to stand upon. He was a pre-war "knot," defying English imitation: his species still survives in France, and, of course, congregates in such places as Royan. It is eloquent of the tolerance of Frenchmen that this type is still uncomplainingly suffered, though you must remember, at the same time, that, for all his individualism, a type is what the Frenchman loves best.

Compare the effects of the war on this bathing knot and on Olga of Arles, whom we still held dear. He had probably fought and suffered: she too had suffered—as greatly and with less reason than he. But whereas he, with his grown-up freedom, had recovered so completely as to bear no sign of what he had gone through, she was condemned to a life that might well convert her to the theory of eternal punishment. He was rich, could forget war's hurt (and was probably busily doing so at this moment); she, penniless, had to make the best of a bad business inside four stone walls. And perhaps he had not even suffered. . . .

We dismissed the knot from our minds and sent a little remembrance to Olga. At the back of our

thoughts, perhaps, was a wish to make a peace offering to all children, whose accusations, were not the cases so readily settled out of court, might prove damning to our self-respect.

You know the kind of man whose voice, even when it is not raised above normal pitch, dominates a room so that no one else can carry on a coherent conversation: that is the man Royan needs. It is oppressively subdued in its respectability, toned to a pitch at which scandal is the only conversation audible.

"But you know," said one tent on the beach to her neighbour, "you know what was said of her last season?"

"No?"—The second tent quite perceptibly pricked her ears.

"Well, of course, one can never be certain what's true and what isn't, but several people have told me that she . . ."

The loud voiced man would blow all this sort of nauseous rubbish away. It couldn't exist when he was in Royan. I wish he would go there.

"These socks of mine were perfectly ridiculously cheap, you know." The pale youth wafted the amber cigarette holder from his mouth, and displayed a length of sky-blue sock. "My hosier tells me that next season they will be wearing . . ."

Where is that loud-voiced man? Perhaps he has gone back to the sea from which he roars in the winter. His voice then is dominating enough!—but the little dragon-flies opening and closing their pretty coloured wings and the big bluebottles crawling over the garbage are all hibernating in their warm holes out of his reach. That is the curse of being rich—you can always escape the man with the loud voice.

Royan did not receive us with open arms: we were so obviously out of place. If we sat down on a

seat its other occupants "moved up one," if we walked we were given a wide berth, everywhere we were looked at askance.

We were rather proud of it.

We went to the station to put our packs into the cloak-room while we looked for a lodging in which to spend the night.

A wasp-waisted man in a tight-fitting ochre and black uniform and peaked cap—so immaculate that he might just have stepped out of a bandbox—approached suavely.

"You are looking for a hotel, sir," he said in English. "The Hôtel de la Plage is the best in Royan—next to the beach—terrace overlooking the sea—every comfort—all——"

"No," I said, "I am not looking for a hotel."

"Perhaps you would like to lunch there, sir. Excellent lunch—table d'hôte,—à la carte—best wines. . . ."

"No thanks," I replied, turning my back on him.

"This, sir, is a view of the hotel—terrace over the sea—next to the——"

"Look here," I asked exasperated. "Do I look as if I should live in the best hotel in Royan?"

He shrugged his shoulders and smiled idiotically. I noticed he was wearing side-whiskers and that annoyed me still further.

"M'sieu is American."

"And you think every American a millionaire?"

He shrugged again. "It is the best hotel—" he re-commenced. "M'sieu would perhaps see——"

My pride was pricked. He thought us worthy of gracing "the best hotel in Royan." Then I grew furious.

"I am not American and I wish you would go away," I exclaimed.

"You would perhaps like the picture of the——"

"No. Go away!"

"The bus is at the station for your luggage."

Words failed me. I gave him a sou. He faded rapidly.

Cheerlessly I looked at Helen. We saw a porter lounging against a wall.

"Tell me," I asked him, "where does the next train go to?"

He appeared a little startled. I repeated the question.

"*Farçeur !*" he exclaimed.

"But I am serious—perfectly serious. We want to go there."

"Where?"

"Don't you understand, man? Wherever the next train goes to."

"Pons?"

We left him. The booking-office had just opened with a click.

XV

NIGHT-BIRDS

I

FROM yellow sand to ripening corn. Beyond Royan the sands disappear in a ripple of wheat over the rich landscape. Before we had time to appreciate the change, the Dungeon Tower and steep ramparts of Pons were abreast of us.

How is it that no one has celebrated Pons? It is as quiet and undisturbed as if there were no feverish world of tourists all round. A few visitors from Royan drop in casually during the season, look at the river until the next train is ready to take them back, and leave without knowing the surprises the town has to offer. For surprises are sprung on you at every turn—but the biggest of all is that a town so rich in picturesqueness of every kind can remain unhonoured and unsung. It is a revelation in the way of the world.

At Pons you may talk intimately with every century from the twelfth to the present—most intimately of all, perhaps, with the eighteenth in the formal gardens of box hedges and quaintly cut yews which face the Hôtel de Ville. This is the former château built on arches over the rock, and you may easily block out the jarring official posters with greenery. Tall lines of poplars hide the railway station below the walls at your side: there is no sound or sunlight beneath the heavy curtain of trees above you: there is everything to

seduce you into a long day-dream. You may walk a few yards to the ramparts and look over the smiling golden valley and the neat market gardens below; you may turn away from the château towards the Place de la République and see a shallow pond with two white swans; you may look again between the giant yew trees down the path and past four moss-covered stone seats, to the fountain out of which bubbles a thin jet of water which runs from its basin past a Romanesque chapel to the walls—and wherever you look there is nothing that will seem to you an anachronism, nothing that does not intensify the eighteenth century atmosphere.

“I feel as if I ought to be wearing a white wig and picture hat and little silver buckled shoes with red heels,” exclaimed Helen.

Like a Watteau shepherdess,” I replied. “Do I happen to be the gallant or the sheep?”

“The goat,” said Helen.

Walk along the streets of Pons and the century changes. You are in the coaching days with a French Pickwick prominent in the scene, a Pickwick who is not of the West at all but of the exuberant Rhone Valley.

That is it—Pons is a mild return to the Midi. What it is that makes it so—whether it is the cool heavily-treed squares, or the red and green pinacles of the roofs like the spike on a Pickelhaube, or the sundials on the white painted chimneys—whether, in short, it is the assumption of the inhabitants that life will be a hot sunny affair, to be got through as much in the shade as possible, I do not know. Madame Mayou and her buxom daughters were too occupied to tell me.

These kept a little hotel, patronised chiefly by commercial travellers—though it might puzzle one to know what trade was carried on in this place

which is half town and half village. They were travellers chiefly in such commodities as are necessary to every household, and are sold in minute quantities, and they seemed to despise Pons as a town of no account.

"One comes, one goes, one comes again," said the most talkative among them. "Only *le bon Dieu* and the managers know why. One never does any business—fifty francs worth, perhaps, but, *nom de nom*, that won't keep one fat for long, *hein ?*"

Fifty francs worth, certainly, would not have maintained his present girth for a week-end.

"What is your line ?" I asked him.

"Metal polish," he replied. "It's my belief that it all finds its way into this hotel in the end."

Very probably he was right. The copper pots in the kitchen were mirrors of industry, the candlesticks shone with their own lustre—one was afraid of touching the brass door handles for fear of leaving a mark, so one always left the door ajar and opened and closed it with one's foot.

It was Jeanne who was responsible—Jeanne with the muscles of a horse and the face of a dumpy squat angel, who, on finding herself locked out one night (she ought not to have been away from home so late) broke a garden seat in front of the hotel, and extricating a piece of iron from its wreckage, burst the lock of the side door and finally rated her mother for going to sleep in the kitchen.

"What else to do ?" she asked laughingly afterwards. "You would not have had me sleep in the stables. Besides, I had to clean the boots. No, it was mother's fault entirely. . . ."

No work was too hard for Jeanne. First up in the morning, she pumped water for half an hour, then washed the hall and cleaned out the dining-room. By that time those "commercial" who

were leaving by the early train were clamouring for breakfast; she took it to each of them with a quiet smile and a cheerful greeting and then attended to her mother, whom age was beginning to weaken. The morning was occupied in cleaning rooms, while her sister, Marguérite, prepared the lunch. During the afternoon both of them sewed—it was wonderful, they said, how much needed darning—then while Marguérite prepared the dinner, Jeanne polished, drew water, set out the rooms for the night, dressed and in due course waited at table. When the crockery had been washed up, Jeanne tossed her dark hair and was free for the remainder of the day!

“Don’t you ever get tired of it?” asked Helen astounded.

“What is the use?” parried Jeanne, “the work has still to be done.”

“But in the summer for instance?”

“It is hot, yes! One sweats”—with an expressive downward movement of the hands—“but then in the winter it keeps one warm.”

“You wouldn’t get English girls to do it,” reflected Helen.

“English girls are not French peasants,” said Jeanne. “We are peasants, you know, Madame, and have to work or we starve. We are not born rich like English girls.”

“But suppose you fell ill?” I asked. She shrugged.

“There is the hospital.”

“And after that?”

“*Ce qu’on veut.*” What a world of contrast between the fatalism of that “*ce qu’on veut*” of Jeanne’s and Shakespeare’s careless “What you will!”

“One has no time to think,” she continued, “there are always *les voyageurs* to look after. Listen.

There is one calling now," and she bounced upstairs as though she were fresh from a long night's sleep.

We strolled out into the moonlight, Helen and I—a clear yellow light, with heavy stars and a fresh breeze after the stifling heat of the day. At the lower end of the town a fête was in progress round an old Romanesque church: the faint sounds of a band drifted up to us, and every now and then a firework tried feebly to drown the moon. For the rest, the houses were a-twinkle with domestic lights: Pons was absorbed in its own enjoyment: the outside world—well, is there really such a thing?

II

"THIS is the time for walking," exclaimed Helen. She is addicted to these sudden inspirations.

To the intense surprise of the Mayou household and the gathered concourse of commercial travellers, we packed our traps and set off. Their only explanation of our conduct was that we were intensely dissatisfied with something—but with what they could not, for the life of them, discover. And as for us—how could we explain to rational beings one of Helen's "ideas"?

We came out on to the road opposite the hotel.

"Right or left?" I asked.

"Right."

"You want to go back to Royan?"

"Left, I meant."

So to the left we went, and soon the quiet town of Pons was behind us. A rocket from the fair bade us adieu, and almost the last human sound we heard was the animated discussion of the Mayou family and their guests, of which we doubtless formed the subject. Then the night swallowed us up.

The long yellow road, slowly rising to the crest of a hill, seemed to be swept by gusts of darkness

where the shadows of the trees fell across it. The whole landscape was a mist of gold and blue where corn and tree mingled, and a sighing wind, so slight as to make scarcely a movement in the boughs, rose and fell like the distant chords of an organ in Nature's cathedral, interrupted occasionally by the harsh croak of a bull frog or the eerie hoot of an owl. Soft buzzy things floated across the night, brushing lightly against one's face or rushing up in swarms for an inspection of one's clothing. Never did they make any attempt at attack, for creatures of the night are gentle and friendly, seeking company in their wanderings.

We had walked about two kilometres on the road to Saintes when we first saw the scarecrow of a man in front of us. His tatters fluttering gaily in the breeze, he was pushing a dilapidated mail-cart loaded with the oddest assortment of clothing and household utensils imaginable—rags picked up by the roadside, old pots, bits of metal, wood, a broken casserole, two lady's hats and "under-clothing ditto," some scraps of fur, the battered frameworks of several umbrellas, and a doll's head. His own remnants of boots were hanging round his neck and he was walking barefoot.

"A fine night," I exclaimed as we drew level with him.

"For those that have nothing to carry," he replied. "Here, push this a bit."

Nothing loth, I took the greasy handle from him, and pushed the unsavoury collection. The tramp, meanwhile, went to the side of the road and sluiced his face and hands in a stagnant pool. Later he rejoined us.

"Heavy?" he queried.

"Not a bit."

"Suppose you'll want something for it," he grumbled.

"I don't understand you."

"Well, it's plain enough, isn't it? Nobody but a fool does work for nothing. And pushing that's work."

"I'm afraid I must be a fool then," I replied innocently.

"Thought so," he muttered, and strode on in silence.

"Who are you?" he asked suddenly.

"Out of work," I replied shortly, dropping into his style of conversation. "Suppose you tell me who you are?"

"Thought you'd want to know. Foreigner, aren't you?"

"Yes, English."

He grunted again and relapsed into silence. Helen laid a trembling hand in mine.

"Aren't you going to tell me who you are?" I said, after another kilometre.

"What do you want to know for?"

"Companionship."

He laughed at the idea of it, and did not reply.

"Here, take hold of this contraption," I exclaimed, releasing my grasp of the mailcart.

"What for?"

"Your beastly surliness."

"You're impertinent for your age," he answered menacingly.

"I've fallen in such pleasant company," I retorted.

Luckily the mailcart threatened to run away down a slope and needed all his attention for the moment: he was a bad-tempered devil.

"Look here, don't be a fool," I said. "We're going all in the same direction and might as well travel together."

I felt instinctively the sort of reply that was forming in his loutish mind.

"Please don't forget Madame," I said.

In a minute his demeanour changed. He pulled off his ragged cap.

"Madame will pardon me?" he asked.

What followed makes me doubt whether it is justifiable to leave any one, however idle or criminal his mind, to follow merely his own devices without an attempt at reaching the essential "human" part of his character. From the moment I drew attention to the presence of Helen, the tramp might have been a different man as far as his manners were concerned. In his topics of conversation, admittedly, he was deplorable, but there was a feeling of uneasy shame about him which was all to his credit. He grew affable.

The talk ran largely on petty theft, with digressions into burglary, rick-firing, blackmail, and sabotage on railways—a rather aristocratic form of livelihood this last, at which our friend professed himself an adept. It required at least two accomplices, he told us, but with luck the booty was sometimes enormous. Of course, he explained shamefacedly, it was only in extremities that one resorted to such measures.

"Suppose you get caught?" I asked.

"One goes to jail," he answered. "Hard labour is unpleasant but it does not last for ever."

"Is it worth it?" Helen was well to the fore in this conversation.

"The big jobs? No. The small ones pay better, taking into account the risks."

The moon was sinking, and in the East was that faint relieving of the indigo sky which precedes dawn. The tramp took us into a field where he camouflaged his mailcart and its load with brush wood.

"Look here," he said, drawing us together confidentially, "you're both young and inexperienced

but I can see you're keen to learn. Take a tip or two from me. Keep your knife sharp—spend your time on it till it's like a razor; a blunt knife never cuts anything. Keep your hands supple—practise sometimes on each other. Never sell your stuff less than twenty kilometres from where you got it. Always have a revolver to scare old women with, but never load it—that's a fool's trick. There's a lot more you'll pick up yourselves, but those things I've told you are useful. I'm lying low to-day. Au revoir."

He gripped our hands; and as the first flush of day tinted the tree tops he dropped into a ditch to sleep.

Helen and I looked at each other.

"Did you take in everything he said?" I asked.

"Everything," she replied, "in case we are unemployed again."

"We need never be that. Here's all Saintes opening its pockets to us."

"I would rather it opened a bedroom door," yawned Helen.

III

SAINTES is a town which, proud of its Roman remains, tries to take itself seriously, forgetful of the fact that nearly every street ends in a meadow. With a quiet and thriving life of its own, it seems ambitious to become a tourist centre—it is as if Pons suddenly awoke to the fact that it had attractions to offer and began to "push" them. The result is disappointing: as yet, at least, the mechanism of the push is rather too apparent, and Saintes, which is really a jolly, unfinished little place, is making efforts which will only undermine its attractive personality.

Stick to the marketing streets of the town if you wish to find out what Saintes really is—the streets where you can buy cherries and cheese and soap and

live ducks and take them all home in a big wicker basket to the kitchen. As these streets are not far from the river, they are comparatively airy to stroll in, in spite of the grilling heat of the town—in fact, the male section of the inhabitants seems to spend most of its time, pipe in mouth, on the adjacent doorsteps looking at the frantic endeavours of the fowls and ducks to escape from their narrow cages.

This July morning, when the heat prevented us from sleeping so that we had wandered irritably into the market quarter, the birds were making strenuous efforts after liberty. It was exceptionally hot, and the men on the doorsteps watched with lazy interest their ruffled feathers and loud-voiced protests while the vendors took advantage of a temporary patch of shade to temper business with comfort. Then the old lady, who is primarily responsible for the events of this story, hove in sight.

At a guess you would have put her age at about seventy, but from the evident weight of her household basket, brimming over with shining purple cherries, she must have been younger. She briskly negotiated for a duck, too—a fine white bird which appeared to take quite an intelligent interest in the proceedings. The bargaining being concluded, she tied its feet together and hobbled away with her new purchase swinging head downwards from her formerly free hand.

The intelligence of the duck was now devoted to another object—how to recover its upright position. It struggled with wings and feet—but that was not the first time the old woman had carried a bird home. It craned an anxious neck to take stock of things—but the flounces of her black skirt flapped into its eyes and drove it downwards again. It opened its mouth, first in silence and then to emit a plaintive quack—but the two ribbons from her

white lace cap—it was flat and square, like a “mortarboard”—were blown round her ears by a slight breeze, so that they deafened her to the duck’s complaint. The old woman had it every way.

But that very cap—the pride of its owner and a marvel of workmanship—was her undoing. As she turned the corner on to the riverside quay, a little whirlwind lifted it perpendicularly from her head. A gasp, a windmill of arms and skirts, a purple shower of cherries, a flutter of feathers—it was all over in a second. The cap sailed upwards like a white yacht, the duck lay on the ground, cherries rolled over the cobbles into the gutter, the old woman stood confounded in the midst of the wreckage not knowing which way to turn first.

“Quick, mother, or you’ll lose it,” cried a passing youth, pointing to the cap and keeping his eyes on the cherries.

“What to do now?” wailed the old woman.

“Run after it,” cried the youth.

The men on the doorsteps chuckled to each other and kept silence.

The wind had now dropped the cap some few yards away. The old woman darted after it, while Helen, who had just come on the scene, drove the disappointed youth up the street and collected the cherries. For myself, I sided with the men on the doorsteps.

Thanks and the adjustment of the cap occupied some minutes. The old woman took up her basket, stooped to catch hold of the——

It was not there.

Only the piece of dirty cord which had secured its feet marked the spot on which the duck had lain.

With a cry the old woman seized the string.

“Which of you has got it?” she screamed. “Lazy vagabonds that you are, which of you has robbed me?”

"None of us, mother," replied one of the men.
"It's only a duck, anyway."

"Yes, and a duck's a duck, you thieves."

The men laughed. "Come and search us," said another, good-humouredly.

"I wouldn't put my hands on you," retorted the old woman.

"There it is," yelled a small boy, pointing to the gutter some distance up the road. "We'll catch him, mother."

Two of the men rose in pursuit, but the old woman was in front of them both.

The duck, however, must have got wind of impending events. Hitherto it had been peacefully recovering its lost dignity: now it set off with a great waddling and an extended neck down the street.

The hunt grew: another man joined in the chase.

The duck encountered a dog, flew at him and routed him. The field yelled vain encouragements to the dog.

A pedestrian, coming from the opposite direction, tried to head the duck off. It dodged skilfully: he, too, swelled the hunt.

The duck, becoming scared, made for an open shop door: the chase, seven or eight by this time, felt sure now of their quarry; but the foolish shop-keeper drove it out again into the roadway.

A well-meaning woman in a first floor window threw a bucket of water over it; this had the effect of thoroughly frightening it, so that it flew on to the wall next the river. At this same moment the crowd drew level, but it was obviously not an occasion to attempt any haphazard snatching. They formed a wary semi-circle with the duck in the centre: one of them tried to coax it.

Step by step the semi-circle closed: the crowd behind it became dense and speechless with excite-

ment. The duck's attempt at liberty was nearly ended, though the manner in which it shifted its anxious little eyes suggested that it, at least, was ignorant of the fact.

The youth who had been baulked of his cherries had his revenge. Quickly approaching through the crowd, he pushed the man who was nearest the duck. There was a roar of anger, a loud quacking, a fury of feathers, and a row of disappointed heads on the parapet watched the duck alight in the water below.

"A boat!" cried someone.

There was a rush for a small boat moored to some steps near-by; but the duck was swimming with the current and had made good progress by the time a boat put off.

Meanwhile, the old woman, thoroughly exhausted and despondent, sat on the kerb to regain her breath and to listen to the latest bulletins from the scene of the race.

"They're going well, mother. You'll have your duck back soon. . . ."

"*Mon Dieu*, but they are hot. . . ."

"Watch them, they're gaining. . . ."

"But see, what's happened. . . .?"

"They've got their oar in the weeds. . . ."

"They've stopped. . . . they can't get it out. . . ."

"That's better. They're off again. . . ."

"Where's the duck? . . ."

"There he is. . . . right down there. . . ."

"What, near the bend of the river. . . .?"

"Yes, just reaching it. . . ."

"I say, they're a long time behind. . . ."

"But they won't be long now. . . ."

"There he goes. . . . round the bend. . . ."

"I don't see him."

"He's gone. . . . they're just reaching it. . . ."

"There they go. . . ."

The old woman waited and waited.

There is no conclusion to this story. And I had intended to write something really informative about Saintes.

IV

As we sat in an indifferent little café in the Cours Reverseaux, on the outskirts of the town, a figure edged up behind us.

"I am moving on to-night," it said. "Coming?"

Our surly night companion needed no persuasion to have a glass with us: he had been already licking his chops when he first spied us, and foresaw an assuaging of thirst in his very invitation.

"Where are you going this time?" I asked.

"Rochefort."

"Why do you want us to come with you?"

He shrugged. "Perhaps the road does not seem so long," he replied.

"I expect not—when you can find some fool or other to push your confounded mailcart for you."

He grinned sheepishly, then winked. "I haven't got it any more."

"So that it's just us three?"

"Yes."

"And how long do you propose to take over the journey?"

"Three nights, perhaps."

I looked at Helen and dropped into English.

"Well?" I asked.

"Might as well be that as nothing," she answered. Helen had not been favourably impressed by our former experience of his company.

"We'll come with you to Rochefort but there's one thing I want to explain first. We're putting ourselves in a delicate position. . . ."

The tramp's face lighted up. "So you've profited by my advice?"

"Be quiet. I want you to understand we're not thieves—we've never been able to get up sufficient pluck even to pick a pocket."

"Perhaps the right occasion has never come," he interposed.

"So that you see if you should happen to be caught while you're with us, we should find ourselves in a very awkward pickle."

The tramp laid a finger cutely on his nose. "Never fear," said he, "I don't give away pals—if they don't give me away."

"It's a bargain?"

"Done. Let's drink to it."

He ordered more wine, drank jovially and left me to pay for it.

We met Marcel—we discovered that to be the most frequently adopted of his several names—on the outskirts of the town at midnight and took once more to the open road. Étienne, René, Marcus—our various companions of the past few months, were very close to me as we definitely added Marcel to their number. But perhaps none of them would have approved the strange "no-splitting" contract that had been made between us—and I myself wondered exactly what I should do if confronted by a pert gendarme with levelled revolver. You may sometimes joke about a sword, especially if it is big and heavy, but a revolver is an uncomfortably humourless sort of weapon.

Marcel was in high spirits and opened conversation by apologising for not paying for the afternoon's drinks.

"I ought to have done it," he said, "but the fact of the matter was, I had buried my money-box in a field and didn't want the whole world

to know the whereabouts of my *coffre-fort*. One has to use discretion."

"I suppose you left it there till your next visit to Saintes?" said Helen.

He grinned and slapped his ragged pocket. "Would either or both of you like to get it from me?" he replied. "I seldom go to the same town twice. There are plenty places up and down France, and I know them all—but it's a tiring life, and I've had ten years of it."

"What made you take to it at first?" I asked.

"A woman. Like the rest of them, she couldn't take a joke."

"Oh?" cried Helen, eager for the defence of her sex.

"You might as well try to play with a hyena."

"What did she do, anyhow?" I pursued.

"Laid in the gutter and screamed—it was all she could do," continued Marcel. "I gave them a run for their money, though, before they caught me . . . that's what started me on this life. One soon accumulates experience."

We were resting at the moment in a dense oak wood, through whose trees the moon shone in tiny rustling patches. Suddenly an owl hooted. We all three jumped to our feet.

"—and nerves," exclaimed Marcel irritably. "What made you set me thinking?"

"I'm going to stop outside Tailleburg," he said when we resumed our walk, "there's something I want to find out about that place. I may be there for a day or two but I will let you know when and where to meet me."

"But you said you were proposing to take only three days to Rochefort?"

"You may leave me if you want to," he replied. "But don't forget our bond stands. If not, you know, there are plenty of people with knives."

"Which they may keep to themselves," said Helen hurriedly. "We'll wait for you all right."

Marcel grunted. "Don't want to see either of you in the town. What I want to do is . . . *dit, donc*, what's that?"

A glimmer of light behind us showed our silhouettes unpleasantly plainly on the road. Marcel motioned us to keep still, then cautiously looked round.

"A motor," he said softly. "Into the hedge with you."

We all three jumped down the bank and lay low. The motor passed quickly along the road, its headlights jerking beams of haphazard day into the forest. When it was out of sight Marcel rose.

"It is always well to be careful," he remarked. "We may go on now. Tailleburg is only two kilometres away: in a short while I shall leave you. Don't be fools in the time we are here, and keep your stuff packed ready to move. I ask you both again—don't be fools."

He was so earnest in his entreaty that his voice still sounded in our ears when we had entered the little town and were settling for a few hours' sleep.

V

ON the second day at Tailleburg, the scene of an English defeat by the French in 1242, we wandered over the corn-covered district, through close little woods and over great fields of waist-high wheat, and went to bed thoroughly tired. Our room was the best the little country hotel had to offer—low-ceiling'd and with small windows, stuffy at the best of times and rendered more suffocating in this grilling summer by being filled almost to bursting point with faded rickety upholstered furniture. It was distinctly a room to have avoided, but hospitable as were the village folk, they had no other to offer us.

And I could not persuade Helen to sleep in the fields. She said she felt thunder in the air. She is a wise wife. We should have been drenched to the skin.

We saw nothing of Marcel, but talked almost incessantly of him. Helen enlarged on our risks in being in his company at all; I pointed out that we should, in case of necessity, be able to give a reasonable explanation—one that would satisfy even a French gendarme—and that Marcel's bark was, I suspected, a good deal worse than his bite. I knew something of the English tramping fraternity, had found many of them distinctly companionable chaps beneath their unwashed hide, and was able to place Marcel, with fair accuracy, as one to whom petty theft and an occasional burglary was the normal limit of crime. A criminal of desperate character does not boast of his accomplishments—he is usually too much of an artist for that.

With the approach of fatigue conversation dropped, and it was a very weary couple who betook themselves to the hideous room. Helen threw wide the window—as narrowly wide as it would go—and hurled most of the clothes from the bed. Going to the door, she swung it violently backwards and forwards, leaving it ajar.

"Now I feel I can breathe," she exclaimed.

We blew out the candle and lay for some time as in an oven.

"Asleep?" murmured Helen.

"I should have been if you hadn't spoken," I retorted.

"Sorry," she replied and turned over.

Soon after, the persistent singing of a mosquito round my head drove me to fury.

"Damn the little beast," I snorted, making violent grabs at the darkness.

"Do be quiet," exclaimed Helen. "You woke me up."

"You're lucky to have been asleep at all," I said savagely.

We lit the candle, caught the mosquito and refreshed ourselves with a breath of torpid air from the window. Then, luckily, we both dropped off to sleep.

It must have been a couple of hours later—the moon had just risen—when Helen shook me.

"I think there's someone about," she whispered. "Listen."

The creeper below our window rustled. The "someone," whoever he might be, was evidently counting on a houseful of heavy sleepers.

After a few minutes' silence there came the soft opening of a door and a muffled footfall. Through our door, which we had left ajar, we heard a deep creak on the stairs. A long quiet followed.

Very slowly, above the stair tops, appeared a crouched head. Something about the head made me laugh to myself.

"What's the matter?" whispered Helen anxiously, as if she thought I had gone into hysterics.

"Marcel," I chuckled. "Keep quiet for Heaven's sake, or you'll spoil the joke."

The man had reached the top of the stairs now, and was cautiously looking round him. As I suspected, he caught sight of the open window through our door, and thinking it an easy "click," made for us. We closed our eyes as if asleep until he was inside the room. Helen pretended to grunt uneasily.

Marcel turned as if he had been shot, and "froze." In a few minutes he began to move again.

"Oh, go away," I murmured, as if talking in my sleep.

Of course I could not see what happened, but there

was a noise as of a chair falling. I "woke up" and sat bolt upright in bed. I saw nothing—except Marcel's foot sticking clumsily beyond the lower corner of the bedpost. The foot looked painfully nervous.

I pretended to hum and ha about having heard a noise, then turned over on the side where I could see the foot, and "went to sleep" again. It must have been a quarter of an hour before Marcel moved—I never imagined him other than cautious, but this patience in a cramped position surprised me. At last the foot was carefully withdrawn and his ragged body slowly appeared at the end of the bed. He looked at us narrowly but detected nothing. When, however, he made for our knapsacks, knowing his particular theories of meum and tuum, I thought it wise to open conversation.

"Good evening, Marcel," I said cheerfully. "Or should it be good morning?"

Marcel "froze" again: but I was "asleep." Helen spoiled the game with a chuckle.

"Silence or I fire," he whispered savagely, wheeling round and pointing a revolver at us.

"Do you think we are old women," I whispered back. "Marcel, you silly fool, put that toy away."

"Who are you?" he asked; he was trembling.

"Two night-birds," replied Helen.

"Are you looking for some more stuff for us to push?" I enquired.

"You!" he exclaimed. "*Nom de Dieu*, you gave me a fright."

"Sorry I can't return the compliment," I retorted. "But, look here, this alters matters very materially, you know. Perhaps you have not heard of the English saying that there's honour among thieves. If you try to burgle a friend it's only tit-for-tat that the friend should tell what he knows about you, eh?"

"You dare not," he answered in a voice in which fear was uppermost.

"Men with knives, you mean?" I asked jocularly.

"They are real," he said.

"As real as your revolver, with knives as sharp as your wits."

"Besides, you don't know anything about me."

"Not much, perhaps, but enough to make a very pretty story of rick-firing, blackmail and sabotage on railways—to say nothing of burglary and pocket-picking."

"Then there is only one way. . . ." He took a step towards the bed.

"You want me to raise the house?"

Marcel stopped still and scratched his head. "I've never been in such a mess," he ejaculated ruefully.

"And you may thank your lucky stars you won't be taken advantage of," I replied. "We've got the whip hand, and we'll show you how friends ought to behave to one another."

"I swear it was a mistake," he said.

"I don't believe even you would have been such a fool on purpose," I continued. "Now, get out of that window—quick—and I won't say anything to anybody in Tailleburg."

"Where then?" he asked anxiously.

"In England," I said.

He gave a sigh of relief, and cocked his leg over the window sill.

"We don't want to see you again."

"You won't," he replied, and scrambled down into the night.

VI

Two mornings afterwards we entered Rochefort. The first sight that greeted us was Marcel between

a couple of gendarmes. His wink as we passed was scarcely perceptible.

A friendly car gave us a lift as we passed the Arsenal; we were hot and tired and must have moved pity even in the steel of a gun.

"Where are you going?" asked the motorist.

"Anywhere," we answered.

"La Rochelle?"

"Yes."

He drove like the fiend over the flat intervening country and in an hour we were within the gates of France's Dream City.

XVI

JEAN-FRANÇOIS

I

✓
THE heart of La Rochelle is the harbour, and enclosed within its towered entrance is a very riot of colour and rich life. The rest of the town is merely an amplification and an explanation of the harbour—when you know what it has to show you, you know La Rochelle—the town of dangerous dreaming. Throughout its chequered history it has dreamed dangerously either of religion or of the sea, and though its harbour is now of small importance, La Rochelle has not lived in vain. Liberty owes much to its sons—and their strain has not yet died out.

You see it every day round the harbour when the moth-like fishing-boats, their coloured sails aglow in the morning sun, come back from their nights at sea. Stern, rough men and women—folk with whom an impatient word means a blow, but who will smile like children if only you will humour them—disembark with their silver loads of fish and spend the day lounging on the quay-side or cleaning their boats, silent usually, or indulging in rough horseplay, never carelessly light-hearted, always with the distant horizon before their eyes.

Or if on some voyages the women are left at home, in the morning mother and baby come down to meet daddy as he passes the two old towers guarding the harbour mouth, and putting his helm hard

to port, swings into the quay and makes fast. There is no time lost then ; baby, light as a feather, is swung into his arms, and mother is released for an hour or two from her responsibility—for the uncouth fisherman is the merriest, kindest, tenderest daddy in the world for baby, who as an embryo fisher must early become accustomed to the smell of ships and the sea. Nearly every day daddy plays with the child where that smell is strongest : until one day Biscay flicks its tail, and one more ship is casually posted as “ not returned from sea.”

This had happened to little Jean-François only a short time before he came into our lives.

“ Daddy says . . . ” he commenced, and then he stopped. It was so strange, as yet, to think of Daddy in the past tense. Then he would toddle from the Débit de Vin, held by his aunt, the good widow Bobinec, across the wide street to the harbour and sit intently watching the varied tasks of the fishermen. Perhaps he was wondering why, when all these boats had come back, Daddy’s had not.

That was a question puzzling alike to sailors and divines. Gustave Espérendieu, as his name tells you, was of sturdy Huguenot descent—“ You see ? ” murmur the Catholics—though his father had lapsed from the Reformed Faith and had brought up his son in the Catholic Church—“ Just the reason,” sigh the Protestants. He was an excellent master of his vessel, fearless and trustworthy—so fisher-folk remain silent, having no concern with his soul, conscious only that they have lost a staunch comrade. Perhaps theirs is the biggest loss of all.

Jean-François, at least, can imagine no bigger. Mother having already faded from his short memory, Daddy occupied it all. Aunt Bobinec, though she occasionally spoiled him, had, at other times, a

short way with naughty children—she was emphatically a person whose mental barometer must be carefully watched. She wore, too, a spotless white cap, full of elaborate lace, with two white ribbons hanging down almost to her waist—these ribbons were a source of endless temptation to Jean-François, but woebetide him if he as much as approached them for sound punishment from her strong arm—which made him howl again—was the invariable reward. She was a nasty stuck-up beast at such times, was Aunt Bobinec, but that mattered little when Jean-François could run away to sympathetic Daddy. There was no Daddy now. . . .

Jean-François Espérendieu, six though he was, and proud of his age, could not sometimes restrain a tear at his own loneliness. Why had Daddy gone out that night . . . ?

“What’s the matter with you, my little man ?” I asked, finding him lachrymose on the quay.

Two big liquid eyes looked up into mine ; but there was no answer.

“*Sais pas*,” he murmured at last.

“That’s a fine answer !” I sat down on a seat and took him on my knee, but the grubby little urchin wriggled off and sat at my side. Then he wiped his nose on his sleeve.

“Come, you feel better now,” I exclaimed cheerfully. He looked at me with eyes full of reproach, as if he did not appreciate this spirit of flippancy.

“I think I know what he’d like,” said Helen. Jean-François turned to her in expectation.

“What’s that ?” I asked. Jean-François’ eyebrows began to rise and the suspicion of a smile to appear in his wan little face.

“Ah !” replied Helen mysteriously. There was no holding him back. The lady meant to give him something good, but what could it be ? Jean-François was itching to know.

"Can't you guess?" continued Helen. But he could not.

"An ice." His eyes were sparkling now, and as Helen returned from an ice-cream stall with a big wafer in her hand the past was completely driven out of Jean-François' mind. Look what the lady was going to give him!—he had never had such a big one before.

He gloated over it for some seconds, spilling a portion on his smock and licking it off again, regarding the enormous wafer in his hands with incredulous amazement. Then he attacked it, smearing it over his face, coughing with its cold, enjoying himself immensely.

"*Qu'as-tu là ?*" asked a passing fisherman who knew the child.

But Jean-François just gurgled out an incomprehensible reply and continued to lick.

The wafer was nearly finished when a flutter of dress, ribbons and white lace cap behind startled him out of Paradise.

"*Ah, mon Dieu, que mange-t-il ?*"

Jean-François crammed the remainder of the wafer into his mouth and slid from the seat.

"I'm ready, Auntie," he said meekly.

"Where did you get it?" asked Aunt Bobinec, her worn face expressing a mock seriousness.

Jean-François pointed to Helen.

Aunt Bobinec clucked her astonishment, winked at Helen and then turned to the child.

"Thank the lady," she demanded.

Jean-François remained still for a second, then put his smeary face up to be kissed. "*Merci, M'dame,*" he whispered.

"When will you come and see me again?" asked Helen.

He considered her seriously.

"When you will buy me another ice," he replied, his face full of memories.

But Aunt Bobinec had carried him away before we could arrange a meeting.

II

NEVERTHELESS, it was not difficult to meet Jean-François. You hung about the harbour, watching the blue, red, brown, yellow, green—all the colours, in short—of the sails crowded in it, and sooner or later he would trot serenely over from the Débit and put his hand into yours. You knew it at once from the fact that it was an unusually sticky little hand for all Aunt Bobinec's attention.

"Ah well," she used to say, "perhaps getting dirty is the greatest pleasure left to him, poor mite." And then she would sigh for her lost brother Gustave and wonder what would be best for *le p'tit*. Having no children of her own—both had died—Jean-François held her motherly old heart with peculiar fierceness. Her entire life, emptied first of her children, then of her husband, lastly of her brother, twined itself, gnarled and sharp-edged as experience had made it, round the little bit of puzzling and puzzled humanity that was her nephew. Yet so rapidly did her moods and his chase each other across their respective temperaments that there seemed scant hope of their becoming the firm friends Widow Bobinec so ardently desired. If Jean-François were in playful mood, his aunt would find herself preoccupied; if, on the other hand, she were disposed to make much of him, he, mistaking it for teasing, would retire into his shell, sulk, and bewail his loneliness. It was a miniature tragedy into which we strayed when Aunt Bobinec, thinking it would please Jean-François (and for once she was right), invited us to lodge in the tiny bedroom above the Débit de Vins.

"Madame can enter by the side door," she explained, "but I have known my customers all my life—have grown up with them. Madame may find them rough, but they take no advantages, and I turn them out when they have had sufficient."

From our window we looked beyond the harbour to the open sea, and when, one night, there was a violent storm and Biscay seemed split by immense sheets of incessant mauve lightning, Veuve Bobinec came to us in depression after the Débit had closed its doors.

"You will pardon my intruding?" she inquired.
"Of course."

"You see, it was on a night like this that Gustave left port. Jean-François knows it and is terrified of storms"—the child slept in the next room—"I like to be near him at such times in case he calls."

"He has been quiet enough so far," said Helen.
"If you are tired I will look after him."

The widow's eyes filled with tears. "It would be kind of Madame," she said. "I wish I had Madame's way with Jean-François. She can make him do anything she likes."

Helen comforted the poor soul and then led her to her bedroom. Scarcely had she returned when a little wail floated in from the next room.

"Daddy! Where are you, daddy?" it cried.

Helen went to console the kiddy. She found him sitting bolt upright in bed, clutching the blanket with both hands, and whimpering softly to himself. As she opened the door he gave a little cry.

"Daddy!"

Helen could not bring herself to reply, but clasped him in her arms, walking him thus about the room.

"I'm so frightened."

"Nothing will harm you, *mon p'tit*," soothed Helen. She sat on the bed with him as he snuggled

down. Just as she thought him asleep he started up, nearly throwing himself out of her arms.

"Where's my daddy?" he exclaimed.

Then the frightened look she had seen before crept into his eyes.

"Auntie says I shan't see him any more. Is that right?"

Helen brought him into our room, where, by candle-light, we kept him in some fashion amused till the storm abated.

Then she put him into his own bed. "I love you," he said, kissing her; and was asleep at once.

The next morning Aunt Bobinec seemed perplexed.

"What am I to do?" she said. "Some cousins of his in Nantes want Jean-François to stay with them for a time. I should like the child to go, but don't see how I can possibly take him. *C'est embêtant, n'est-ce pas?*"

"Does the boy know anything about it?"

"Not yet. I am loth to disappoint him, but I can't leave the Débit. Business is not done like that."

"I'm afraid I can't offer to look after it for you," I said.

"No, but we might take him," suggested Helen.

But Aunt Bobinec would have none of it. "Some friends may soon be going to Nantes," she said, "and they will take him for me."

"You know of someone, then?"

"Not at the moment. But I can keep my ears open."

"Look here," I said. "Let Jean-François himself decide whether he shall come with us or stay with you until a friend goes to Nantes."

The widow acquiesced reluctantly. But not until I saw him put his arm round Helen's neck, and a sigh almost of jealousy escape from Aunt Bobinec did I realise that I had been cruel.

III

A FEW days later, some three-quarters of an hour before the train for Nantes was due to leave, we stood, a happy party, upon the platform of the station. The merry harbour flashed its bright colours through the broken panes of railway glass while a sizzling heat rose from the metal and asphalt within the dome. We perspired profusely—Aunt Bobinec's cap, donned specially for the leave-taking, threatened to become limp, and Jean-François' collar, very neat beneath his black smock, was already beginning to wilt. It was much too hot to talk and only irrepressible youth showed the slightest sign of liveliness. As the minutes dragged on, even he quietened and at last slunk into a deserted corner.

We had gazed at each other from beneath moist brows until it seemed as if the train would never arrive, when we were startled by a distant whimper. At first we listened with indifferent curiosity until Aunt Bobinec suddenly exclaimed: "Where's Jean-François?"

We looked round in vain: the whimper grew into a roar of agony. Jean-François, posted as missing, danced vehemently round a fat man with a curly beard, holding something big and brown in his hand. Aunt Bobinec bore down on him majestically.

"Where did you get that?" Aunt Bobinec's sight was occasionally at fault.

"Didn't get it," howled Jean-François.

"Don't tell lies, little nephew. How did you come by it?"

"It—it grabbed me."

Aunt Bobinec opened her eyes wide at this. "What in the world has the child got?" she exclaimed.

"Let me rid him of it," said the fat man in an oily voice. He bent down to the child and began vigorous manipulations with bony fingers. In a minute he was puffing like a grampus: then, rising, curled his beard fiercely.

"*Mon Dieu*, but it is a tenacious beast."

By this time Jean-François' howls were resounding through the dome of the station like forty engines all screaming together.

"I only put my finger in the basket," he yelled.

A kindly porter tried his hand at removing the crab; then the fat man had another bout with it. A third man came up, and taking Jean-François on his knee, tried by some mysterious method to remove it with his teeth: it was quite easy, he explained, if only you got the right grip.

Suddenly, just as all three men were arguing vociferously with Aunt Bobinec as to how it should be removed, the little crowd was scattered by the owner of the intruder—a buxom woman who dexterously twisted it from Jean-François' finger, leaving him to suck the injured part vigorously.

"You ought to keep the lid shut," remonstrated Aunt Bobinec.

"If you looked after your child properly there'd be no need to," retorted the woman. "The crab didn't run after him, I suppose?"

Further discussion was mercifully cut short by the arrival of the train. The leave-takings were conducted with due ceremony. We left stern Aunt Bobinec wiping her eyes, settled Jean-François, who had been somewhat rueful since his adventure, into a corner and prepared for a tolerable journey. Jean-François, however, beneath his ruefulness had decided otherwise.

We had scarcely left La Rochelle when he became irritatingly attracted by the flies in the compartment. Had this been empty, chasing them might

have been looked upon as a comparatively harmless amusement, but with every seat occupied—and on a hot day travellers' tempers are short—unfriendly glances were soon cast at us.

"Be quiet, dear," remonstrated Helen.

Jean-François apparently mistook this for some subtle form of joke, for he gurgled his appreciation and redoubled his efforts. Half a dozen dead flies soon littered the floor.

"If you don't stop I shan't give you any *déjeuner*."

There was no joke about a remark like that. Jean-François subsided into a corner.

Helen had just remarked to me, some time later, that he was really a very well-behaved child, when a window-blind in the next compartment to ours flapping outside the train attracted his attention. In a trice he was standing on the seat, leaning as far out of the open window as he could. A motherly old soul next to him grabbed his legs and pulled him down again.

"What did she want to do that for?" said Jean-François.

"To stop you from falling out," Helen told him severely. "You mustn't do that again."

"Why not?"

"Because I say so."

"Does she say so too?"—indicating the motherly old soul.

She nodded.

"Then I shall"—Jean François, however, was not quick enough: both Helen and the M.O.S. had him fast. He commenced to kick.

"You're a nasty fat woman," he exclaimed to the M.O.S.

Although Helen, in her calmer moments, argues against corporal punishment, Jean-François will not soon forget the slap he received.

“A nasty——” he repeated, but got no further. He began to howl.

A pleasant-looking soldier in the opposite corner, who having, as he informed us, three of his own under six, knew all about children, pacified Jean-François with strange head-gears made out of an old newspaper; and after a time food reduced him to absolute docility. He sat, a bloated little figure, gazing abstractedly out of the window. While, as far as could be seen, in the same position, he commenced to giggle.

“Look at that man’s eyebrows,” he exclaimed.

We looked in vain in the direction in which he pointed.

“Oh, do look how he moves them up and down!”

Still we could see nothing. Jean-François became convulsed.

“What a funny man!” he shrieked.

The motherly old soul began to giggle too, and then, severely repressing it, tickled Jean-François’ bare knee to distract his attention. The only effect of this was to make him turn towards the compartment, and pointing a chubby finger at the passenger next to me, to peal again with merriment. The passenger, a nervous, middle-aged man with rapidly moving eyebrows, rose abruptly and went into the corridor.

“You’re a very naughty boy,” I said sternly.

“But wasn’t he funny!”

Then curiosity got the better of me. “How could you see?” I asked.

“In the window.”

I was left to reflect on reflections.

There followed, after this, another interval of blessed peace, broken by the boy turning to Helen and remarking:

“Are you really married?”

"Of course," said Helen.

"Aunt Bobinec didn't think so."

"Oh?"

"No. I heard her telling Pierre one day."

"Well, you shouldn't repeat things you hear."

"But she said . . ."

"I don't want to know what she said, Jean-François." This was heroic on Helen's part.

"How was she to know you were married?"

"This is my wedding-ring." Jean-François examined it minutely.

"Anyone could wear that," he replied with ill disguised contempt.

"Oh no, they can't."

"Why not?"

Rather than be led into a long moral argument which would have left Jean-François still unconvinced, Helen told him to look out of the window. When he had again grown tired of killing flies, he resumed:

"I say, when you're married, do you have babies?"

Helen nodded.

"Have you got any?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Oh, lots and lots of reasons."

"But could you have babies if you wanted them?"

"Of course."

"Then why don't you?"

"Look out of the window, there's a good boy."

But Jean-François was not satisfied.

"Are you going to . . .?"

"I don't know. Now be good."

"But can't you tell . . .?"

"Here are some pictures in the paper. Look at this one. It is . . ."

"But can't you tell . . .?"

It was an actual relief when Jean-François suddenly turned a tragic face to Helen.

"I do feel bad," he said.

"Go into the corridor for a while," I suggested.

"I'll come with you." A contemptuous grunt was my only answer.

"Lie down on the seat then," said Helen.

"Don't want to."

The soldier came nobly to the rescue.

"Here's a hat you haven't seen yet."

"Silly!"

The motherly old soul added her quota.

"Lean up against me, *mon enfant*."

There was a positive snort of disgust from Jean-François. For the second time he stood up on the seat, with his head out of the window; then sat down again, green but relieved.

"How ill the child makes me feel," groaned a young woman, putting her handkerchief to her mouth and fanning herself with the other hand. "You ought to look after him."

"I'm sorry," said Helen. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Don't talk," replied the young woman faintly, and leant against the soldier.

Soon there was a gentle snoring. She and Jean-François had both fallen asleep.

I looked at Helen and mopped my brow.

"It's worth it, all the same," she said.

I knew what she meant.

IV

JEAN-FRANÇOIS' cousins had promised to meet us at the station; but though we hunted high and low we remained like unclaimed luggage in the big central hall. The recognition would, of course, have to be on their side, as Jean-François remembered them but little; so I hoisted him up on to my

shoulder to render him as conspicuous as possible. His only idea was that I was giving him a "joy ride."

"Now let's go back again," he jerked out, as I walked him the entire length of the platform—and Nantes is a fairly long station.

For reasons of my own, I complied.

"Just once more," he pleaded.

"But you're a heavy boy," I expostulated. He grunted incredulously.

"I'm going to carry you back to the central hall, and if we don't meet your cousins there, we shall have to hold a council of war."

"What's that?"

"Well, we shall have to talk matters over."

"Why?"

"To find out what to do next. Do you know where your cousins live?"

Jean-François shook his head cheerfully. "Give me another ride," he commanded.

I took him back into the hall, where Helen was waiting with the luggage, deposited him on top of our packs and began to discuss the situation.

"We none of us know where they live," I said, "and Nantes is a pretty big town to begin a house-to-house search in."

"Why not look in a directory?" suggested the practical Helen.

"Good for you," I replied in mock seriousness. "We'll look for one."

"What are you talking about?" interrupted Jean-François.

"Seeing where we can find your cousins."

"Don't much want to find them," he answered casually. He was enjoying himself immensely with my stick.

"So you don't want anywhere to sleep to-night?" I asked.

This aspect of the question hadn't struck him, but after a short consideration he grinned. "I shall have to stop with you," he said jubilantly.

"But we haven't got anywhere to sleep either."

He looked at us in amazement.

"*Dit donc*," he exclaimed, and began to chew over to himself this remarkable fact.

Helen, who had consulted a directory in a café opposite the station, came back wiping her mouth.

"There's no Dousseaux in the book at all——" she began.

"Nice little café, wasn't it?" I interposed jealously. She nodded.

"We haven't got time to talk about that," she answered, giving her mouth a final dab, "we've got to look after the child. Just go up to a policeman and ask whether he knows anybody of the name of Dousseaux."

"It's a hundred to one he doesn't," I grumbled. But I went, all the same. The policeman stared at me as if I had asked something improper, shifted his revolver, scratched his leg, wiped his forehead with his sleeve, took out a note-book and eyed me suspiciously.

"Who is it you want?" he inquired.

"Dousseaux."

"Of?"

"That's exactly what I want to find out."

"Then I'm afraid I can't tell you. Ask higher up."

I was just returning to the station when he shouted after me: "Not that way. Higher up, I said."

"But I was just going . . ."

"The other way."

" . . . back to the station. . . ."

"You're going in the wrong direction."

It was of no use continuing the conversation. I took off my hat, and saw him out of the corner

of my eye shrug his shoulders as if to say that all the English he'd ever met were fools.

He looked more astonished than ever, and not a little suspicious also, when the two of us, laden with knapsacks and Jean-François, emerged from the station. It was my impression that he pulled out his note-book again, or some sort of manual of instructions, and began to write laboriously and at length. We left him still writing.

We inquired of three more policemen after that with as useful results. Jean-François was getting tired, my own temper was shortening. Only Helen remained serene.

"I'll ask in this grocer's," she said.

"It's like looking for a couple of needles in a haystack," I replied. "I'll give those cousins a piece of my mind when we do find them."

Helen, however, had entered the shop and had left me standing impatiently on the crowded pavement.

I was gazing abstractedly at some chimney-pots in the distance and thinking how finely their smoky redness blended with the blue-greys of the Cathedral near to them, when a young woman came to a standstill opposite me and stared disconcertingly in my direction. I became suddenly aware that Jean-François was missing.

"Jean-François," I called.

To my utter horror, the young woman broke into a joyful smile. "At last I have found you," she exclaimed, and seized both my hands.

The whole of my past rose at a single leap before me: I sorted it out hurriedly but found no corner into which the buxom wench could possibly fit.

"I think M'selle has made a mistake."

"But no." She wouldn't leave go of my hands, confound her. One or two men stared as they passed, and Helen might come out of the shop at any moment.

"May I ask then . . . ?"

"I am Suzanne Dousseaux, Jean-François' cousin."

If Helen had remained inside a little longer I should have kissed Madame Dousseaux out of sheer gratitude. But she emerged.

"I think I have got on the tracks of——"

"Too late. This is the lady."

Jean-François was looking shyly on at all this. Now he blurted out :

"Shan't I come with you any more ?"

"We'll take you to your cousin's if she'll let us," said Helen.

"With pleasure," said Madame Dousseaux cordially. "Though Madame must not expect to find much in our *ménage*. You see," she added, blushing, "Emile and I have only been married about a month."

We found the Dousseaux living in the second storey of the roof of a six-storey house in a narrow roadway leading from the Place Graslin. Their two rooms were barely furnished—a bed, a table, a wash-basin, and a looking-glass were the only pieces in the bedroom beside a large shallow box on two chairs made up with straw mattress and bed-clothes—"for Jean-François," Suzanne explained. Emile, who had just come home after a long day's work at the State tobacco factory, was tired and in little mood for conversation. He could only let his eyes follow the movements of his wife.

"Were you ever in Paris ?" asked Helen suddenly.

"We are both Parisian," Emile answered. "But one must go where work calls. There is little enough at the moment."

Helen glanced over to me. "Do you remember ?" she asked. I shook my head. Helen went to a tiny black-cat charm hanging from the mantel-piece.

"Why do you keep this?" she asked innocently.

Emile laughed lightly, and modestly recounted—our Parisian love scene!

"You've got a jolly good memory," I congratulated Helen.

"Because my heart's bigger than my head," she replied.

We shared the Dousseaux' evening soup: Jean François had been put to bed.

Then Helen glanced over to me with a troubled countenance.

"It's time we left," she said.

When we were again in the roadway she clutched my arm.

"My dear," she sobbed, "the place is alive. They're all over me. And I was so happy having tumbled back into romance."

"I wonder whether all romance is as flea-bitten as the west coast of France," I replied. "What shall we do now?"

"We can't stop in this town the night. I should feel creepy all over for ever."

So, without as much as a good-bye to Jean-François, we fled from Nantes. But Jean-François still receives post-cards from us, and only the other day we had one from him in childish hand: "*Je vous aime, Madame.*"

XVII

ONIONS

I.

YOU will have gathered by this time something of our opinion of the West Coast of France : these sketches form a rough sort of diary written while impressions were still vivid. If you find large blanks in the narrative or consider the subjects trivial you may be able to deduce it the more accurately. It is as I described it to Helen on the last page. But when the train steamed northward out of Nantes station our hearts lifted once more.

The very name of Brittany has magic in it. Her menfolk at Verdun forced from the Germans the reluctant admission "What could we do? The Bretons barred our way." The finest sailors of the French fleet and the sturdiest fishers of her coasts are Bretons. Breton women are the backbone of her agriculture, splendid wives and mothers, filled with the natural refinement of the sea and the fields, and simple enough not to know it. Thunderwater, which had so far proved as arid as the sands it fell upon, was now coming to its own.

II

THE smell of onions will always recall to my mind the picture of a wizened, watery-eyed man (how could he be other than watery-eyed in such an atmosphere?) sitting for hours at a stretch in a

subterranean shop in Vannes. String upon string of onions hang from the roof, and still the old man makes up fresh strings by some process best known to himself, diving his left hand deep into a barrel at his side and working his right convulsively while the lengthening string drops from it to the floor, then coils round itself, looking like a snake that has eaten tennis-balls. When it has reached the required length, he hobbles to a chair placed perilously in the centre of the shop, mounts it with many groans and hangs the new string from the beam. Then he returns to his seat in the corner and commences afresh.

Nobody would have taken Melan le Rousic for a fairly well-to-do man or for the father of a remarkably handsome daughter. Yet he was both ; but the loss of a fortune in his middle age had accentuated a certain capriciousness of temperament and now in his decline, his mind had become feeble. Onions were his passion : he asked for nothing more than to be allowed to string them perpetually and to serve such indulgent customers as came in for small purchases of dried vegetables. He was well known to the fishermen who use Vannes as a provisioning centre and to the farmers of the surrounding district, and since he, or his daughter rather, opened the shop nearly twenty years ago, economical management had more than put them on their feet again. The shop could have been shut to-morrow ; but where else could Melan le Rousic have lived so peacefully in the midst of his beloved onions ?

So to obtain society and companionship—for she could not often leave her father—Marie-Thérèse le Rousic began to take in lodgers. For practical purposes the shop was safe in her father's hands—all, of course, except the balancing of books and the ordering of fresh stock—and when she had tidied

the house till it looked perpetually as though it had just emerged from a spring cleaning, she found time pass slowly. To interfere with her father's little foibles was more than she dared do; being reserved with strangers, she made few new friends; none of her kind read (that was waste of time); but she felt that lodgers might pleasantly fill up the hours between the sewing and the house-work.

"Do you want onions?" growled Melan, when we first entered the dingy little shop.

"No," I said.

He grunted. "What is it then?"

"We want a room, if you have one to spare."

"Haven't one. Take some onions instead. They are the best—and cheap. Look at this string, only——"

Marie-Thérèse entered the shop, filling it completely with her white lace cap, full sleeves, and elaborate apron.

"Sit down, father," she commanded.

"But they want onions," whined the old man.

"No they don't."

"I thought they did"—and he fell once more to forging another link in his endless onion-chain.

Marie-Thérèse led us upstairs to the spotless room before she said:

"You mustn't mind my father. Let him talk to you if he wishes—it'll only be about onions and he soon tires."

It was the next day when Melan, having become more or less accustomed to us in his house, unbosomed himself. He clutched my sleeve convulsively and gibbered with such delight that his watery eyes overflowed down his cheeks as he led me into the shop.

"Look, look, look," he chattered excitedly, "two metres of onions, all for Pézannec who ordered them from me. Two metres! You don't know

Pézanec, do you? A fine fellow who owns his own boat and who always comes to me for his onions. He says I give him best value for money. He is a great friend of mine, is Pézanec, one of my best customers, very fond of onions."

He motioned me to the chair in the centre of the shop.

"Pézanec says," he continued, "that one of these days I shall have to plait him some sails of onions for his boat. I told you he was a fine fellow, didn't I? Well, you mustn't tell anybody, but I've begun. Look in that corner over there—the one behind you. You think they're only a heap of onions, don't you? Now feel of them."

The apparent heap was, in truth, an enormous web, as closely woven as the onions would allow, and tremendously heavy. I must have involuntarily expressed some pathetic amusement, for Melan doubled himself up with senile laughter.

"It's a good joke, isn't it?" he chuckled. "But you mustn't tell Pézanec on any account. He will be so pleased when he comes to order the sails and finds they're already done for him—all of onions. I shall hand them to him like this——" and he struck a pompous attitude; then wagged an admonishing finger at me. "You won't tell him? Now promise me."

The name of Pézanec entered so much into this and subsequent conversations with Melan that I was moved to ask Marie-Thérèse who he was. Her eyes filled with tears.

"The best fellow in the world," she replied.

It seemed that when Melan, before the loss of his money in a fraudulent company, had owned several boats and was on the way to being the master of a large fleet, Pézanec, then a youth, had occupied a junior position in his smallest vessel. After the crash, the boats were sold and the crews

scattered : many families left the town to try their fortunes in other ports, and among them young Pézannec. It was not until five years ago that he returned and in his own boat.

"He came into the shop one day," said Marie-Thérèse, "and saw my father at his onions.

" 'You may not remember me, Monsieur,' he began, but my father interrupted him :

" 'Do you want any onions ? ' "

"A queer expression came into Pézannec's eyes. He looked round the shop, then, seizing two great armfuls, he said : 'Yes, I'll have these.'

"My father almost cried for joy, for it was the biggest sale he had ever made—two large armfuls all at once. And when, a few days later, Pézannec came again into the shop, I found my father on his knees thanking him and telling him that he had made life worth living for a broken old man. Since then, Pézannec has never ceased to make regular purchases and he and my father are, as you have heard, on the best of terms. But my father does not know who Pézannec is, and I cannot, for the life of me, imagine what Pézannec does with all the onions he buys."

I had only one glimpse of "the best fellow in the world." He was standing over Melan, examining the two-metre string.

"A fine piece of work," I heard him say. "You ought to be proud of it."

"But it is for you," argued Melan. "You ordered it, you know."

"*Dame, oui*, I had forgotten." Pézannec went on scratching his head, however, as if his memory were still playing him false.

At that moment Melan caught sight of us as we passed through the shop.

"Good friends should know one another," he cried. "Let us introduce over the health-giving onions."

Pézanec smiled, and entered into easy conversation which Melan followed with little hoots, chuckles, sighs and clapping of hands.

"But perhaps I ought to explain myself," said Pézanec suddenly.

"There is no need," I replied. "Your light has not been under a bushel as far as we are concerned."

"He was the best employer imaginable,"—with a nod at Melan. "It is sad, such an ending. One is able to help sometimes in odd ways."

He laughed nervously, and then, as if he were making a tremendous confession :

"Do you know that since I have taken to eating quantities of onions I have been twice as healthy."

As we all laughed Marie-Thérèse passed through the shop into the house. Pézanec's eyes lingered after the door was closed.

"There goes a fine woman," he exclaimed. "What a wife, what a mother !"

He shrugged his shoulders, and with a smile and a bow went to the door.

"But you have forgotten the onions," cried Melan wildly.

"*Mon Dieu*, my memory is a sieve." Pézanec looped the long onion chain over his arm. As he reached the door Marie-Thérèse's voice was heard singing to herself.

"She is very happy, thank God," said Pézanec, and wiped away a certain moisture which had accumulated in his eye.

"Don't look so tragic," he cried to Helen as he closed the door. "It's only these accursed onions !"

III

MARIE-THERÈSE DE ROUSIC was an ardent upholder of Breton tradition : it was her pride that her costume was among the finest in Vannes. But she was by no means gratified when some English or

American tourist, scenting photographic prey, would turn his camera on her : as often as not she would wheel in the opposite direction, or holding her nose high in the air, brush past him as one brushes past a pariah dog. She had refused time and again to sit to artists—her portrait might have been in some of the big galleries of Europe. A solitary photograph over the living-room mantelpiece commemorated her beauty. That photograph was a thing to marvel at.

For while the face of Breton women in youth and middle-age tends to excessive simplicity, that of Marie-Thérèse showed finely tempered strength. Here, one felt, was a woman who, from experience, knew something of the meaning of life, yet, from lack of introspection, was herself unconscious of the knowledge. She had the habit of taking things happily as they came, neither forcing events nor being forced by them, superior to the surface currents of life, hardly aware of its ground swell, shaping her own course almost intuitively through both towards some spot as yet beyond the horizon. Her daily duties and her daily pleasures filled her mind, leaving little space for vanities—always excepting her Breton costume.

That was a passion with her. To keep it *sans reproche* occupied most of her leisure during the week : every Sunday it appeared, if possible, more resplendent than on the last, for in the week something would have been done to renovate or wash or iron the already dazzling apparel. From the bottom of her heavily embroidered apron to the topmost pinnacle of her lace cap, she was a sight to make a Breton thrill with national pride. Her heavy velvet skirt clasped so wasp-like a waist, her sleeves were so very full, her cap was so remarkable an example of the needlewoman's art, that mere man could not tell you half her glories—unless he

were in love with her. Even Pézannec, whose love was hampered only by a feeling of the difference in their social status—for had not her father been his employer?—could but roll up his eyes and emit a long, low whistle when I asked him to describe her dress to me as it should be fittingly described. To Helen, however, Marie-Thérèse herself was more communicative.

“As for girls who give up wearing their dresses,” she told Helen, “I look upon them as traitors. I know we are all French now, and I am proud of that, but the Breton blood runs even deeper. We are Bretons first. We have kept our native tongue but that, as well as the dress, is becoming out of date. Both are thought old-fashioned, and girls wear the foolish Parisian modes which change every few months and which don’t suit them, *bien entendu*. This dress, I know, cost fifteen hundred francs and that is a lot of money. But the young girls will spend even more if they try to keep up with Paris. And they will not be Bretons—that, Madame, is the pity.”

It was an unusual concession on Marie-Thérèse’s part to allow Helen to put on her costume: Helen was more pleased with the experience than with the comfort of the dress.

“It was simply unbearably hot,” she said to me afterwards. “I had to hold my breath as hard as I could while it was being adjusted, and it was quite difficult to push the skirt in front of me when I walked. The neck was tight and close and I was always in terror of the cap. No, my dear, the Breton costume may be suitable for the Bretons, but give me reasonable fashions, even if they do cost more money.”

Pézannec, too, indulged in Breton dress on Sundays and feast-days—his broad-brimmed hat with two velvet streamers and velvet facings to his

short jacket had become, however, a trifle the worse for wear. He wore them rather sheepishly.

"I'm not certain that they're quite right nowadays," he replied to a question of mine, "except for peasants. I'm a sailor, you see, and one wears a sweater and a close-fitting cap with greater comfort. Besides, we're French, after all, so what's the object in trying to pretend we're something different?"

"Marie-Thérèse would call that heresy," I suggested. He shrugged.

"I know it. But Marie-Thérèse, you see—she's missed so much one can forgive her foibles. She's her own little world and rejects everything that doesn't fit in with it. I don't suppose she's been outside Brittany in her life. But these fancy dresses have got to go: they're hindering us in the world as it is to-day. We can't afford to live on tourists."

"That is the last thing Marie-Thérèse would have you do," I replied.

"Then, with all due respect to her, Monsieur, she had best leave off her present costume. It is beautiful, oh yes, enchanting, ravishing—but it is not practical."

I could not help wondering which, after all, was better worth preserving: the world of charm and beauty and tradition of Marie-Thérèse or the practical one of Pézannec. And, being English, I wondered further whether, after all, there mightn't be a compromise.

XVIII

HOLLYHOCK-LAND

I

IF you know Baptiste Coriton you know the whole country between Vannes and Lorient.

Baptiste lives in a little whitewashed cottage in Plouharnel, by the side of which the long finger of land stretches down to Quiberon. It looks out over the sheltered sea and beyond the peninsula to the stormy Atlantic : behind it the long megalithic lines of Carnac stand isolated both in situation and in time ; but you cannot see them from his garden because of the intervening wall of hollyhocks. Hollyhocks line a narrow path from the roadway to the green-painted front door and they are planted in ragged masses round his well.

“ They are so easily reared,” is his excuse.

Where there are not hollyhocks, tall and straight and unbending, there are chubby, fluffy masses of pink and mauve hydrangeas. The two flowers form, between them, so concise a picture of Coriton and his wife that from the first comparison is irresistible.

“ . . . The wedding was celebrated yesterday of *Hydrangea Ce-qu'on-veut* of Plouharnel, Morbihan, and Hollyhock Coriton, warrant officer in the Fleet of the French Republic, of the same village. The bride, departing from the usual custom of orange blossom and white, was becomingly attired in pink, over which was draped a delicate mauve veil touched

with green. The bridegroom's red epaulettes and cap . . ."

That must have been long ago, however, if, indeed, the reporter's imagination has not been running away with itself. For under a glass case in the bedroom is still preserved the elaborate orange-blossom bridal crown of Madame, and a little contemporary painting of Baptiste, very resplendent in his uniform, finally disposes of any chance of his having worn red either in whole or in part. As much blue and silver as you like—but these are not the colours of hollyhocks, so that the resemblance can only have been in form, not in colour.

Yet not completely. Baptiste's face, or as much as can be seen beyond his pointed black beard and fiercely curled moustaches, is crimson. So is his neck and chest which his open shirt-front expose constantly to the sun. One might be tempted to wonder whether he is not crimson all over like a newly boiled lobster, for all that can be seen is hollyhock colour. So that, after all, the reporter may have been right in the very words in which he seemed to blunder.

You never see a hollyhock bent with age. Baptiste will die with a back like a poker. When he sits down it is plainly an effort to induce the necessary curves, when he tends his garden (which has become lately his chief interest in life) he stoops as a telegraph-pole might to look at a daisy. He must at all times be straightening out creases, trying even now to make his six feet a little taller, his hairy chest a little broader, his voice a little deeper, his moustaches a little more ferocious. If he were to take off his hat you might see the bald patch in the very centre of his head—so he keeps himself covered as long as possible.

There is only one occasion on which he crumples.

"They said I was too old," he cries "—I who

could have navigated any ship they had chosen to give me—I who have fought in China, who have won all these medals, who have retired honourably on a pension and am still fit—they said I was too old. So I sent my sons—poor tools, both of them, compared with their father! And what was the result? *Pouf!* I could have foreseen it. Had I been in charge of the ship, it would not have happened, they would both be here now. The navigator was a fool, or worse—and what did he know of war? But my boys were in his hands. I said they were poor tools—but they were fine lads, all the same. I could have made something of them if only I had been allowed. What else was there for me to do?”

At such times, his daughter is little comfort to him: she even adds to his perplexities.

“Look at the great hulking louts who were saved from the same ship,” he cries. “One of them will come soon and want to marry Agnès—and as likely as not she will accept him. I see them walking about the village together even now, and my heart cries out against it, ‘Would it had been you who had been drowned in place of my boys!’ It is wrong, I know, but when a father is distracted he cannot always keep pace with his thoughts, God forgive him. And if Agnès accepts, can I refuse to bring this ghastly memory into my own house to live with me? . . . I think, M’sieu, I will go and water the cabbages.”

The cabbages are frequently watered, I fear: they are such healthy plants.

But do not imagine that Baptiste lives in his gloomy memories. The hollyhocks and hydrangeas bring smiles which poke forward his beard and bristle his moustaches, and a merry glitter to his eye. Next year he is going to have an even braver show: and there are to be jucier vegetables and more tempting fruit in his half *hectare* of garden.

During the winter he is to repaint his boat and—but if I tell you the secret, you must keep it strictly to yourself.

Baptiste is to have a new pair of trousers.

The ones he wears now are so plentifully sprinkled with blue patches that little of the original material is left: and Madame is constrained, when visitors are present, to force him to the table where all below his waist is hidden. His Sunday pair, blue and white check, hang neatly creased from a peg in the hall, together with his double-breasted coat and blue waistcoat. But it takes little examination to perceive spots in which the check is almost worn off and others in which the stuff has become inconveniently shiny; and the Coritons, having lived in Plouharnel for generations, are people of some standing who have to keep up appearances. The small box in the corner into which, sometimes, Madame slips a franc might be labelled “Appearances Fund.”

“And what about you?” asked Helen one day, when she surprised her in the act.

“Oh well,” laughed Madame timidly, “as for me, black is an excellent wearing colour, *n’est pas, Madame?*”

II

WHEN I said that to know Baptiste was to know the whole Morbihan district, I ought to have qualified the statement: to know him is to know it at its best. For as many different kinds of folk are settled here as there are rocks and islands at low tide—penurious or hard-working, rooted to the soil or sullenly independent, but all of them, even the few rich, meagre in their ways of living. Bread, home-grown vegetables, cider, sometimes, on high days and holidays, a little meat comprise their ordinary diet. And on this one grows neither fat

nor intelligent. In hot weather especially, cider, weak though it is, tells its tale.

Baptiste makes occasional visits to the local Débit de Boissons—one must, he says, see how the village is going on. He rules there by triple right—by superior personality, by having held a position in the Navy, by being a Coriton. His big voice reverberates round the low, dark taproom and contrasts strangely with the quavering voices of the peasants. They themselves feel the difference, and there are times when this jealousy creeps out un-awares.

“Ah, it’s all very fine for you to talk like that,” grumbled one of them to a rebuke of Baptiste’s, “but we can’t all be sailors.”

“No,” snapped Coriton, “but you can try to be men, instead of chaff.”

“Why should we? Peasants we are and peasants we shall always remain: you know that well enough. We shall never have your money nor your opportunities, however much we are men, as you call it. Now if we were Coritons . . .”

“You’d be promptly turned out of the family, my friend.” There was a glitter in Baptiste’s eye. “What’s that you’ve got there?”

“Only a glass of cider, *morbleu!*”

“Your first?”

“What do you think?”

“That!”—Baptiste strode over to the peasant, and seizing the glass, threw the cider out of the window. “You’re fuddled: that’s what’s the matter with you. You know perfectly well you can’t work in a sunny field with your belly full of that muck. Now, M’selle”—turning to the astonished woman behind the counter, “how much was that? I’m going to pay for it.”

The peasant, rising to his feet, was spluttering angrily.

"Get outside while you can," said Baptiste to him. "You'll live to thank me, you fool."

"I believe he's drunk himself," put in another peasant.

"Who said that?" asked Coriton. But there was no answer. One by one the peasants slunk out.

Then Baptiste approached the counter. "I want you to understand that I'm not trying to ruin your trade," he said. "I'm only trying to save these men from themselves."

"I suppose you may think that a sailor shouldn't talk about agriculture," he said to me afterwards, "but though you are a stranger here, you must have seen things for yourself. These men on the farms work long hours but that is largely their own fault. Your agricultural labourer in England—I have met him—is a very different fellow—more intelligent, more resourceful than these men. He, therefore, does not need to spend his whole life in the fields. If you were to give these fools here a machine to do the work for them, they would run to the priest about it or else smash it in their terror. Cider and a full stomach is their idea of Paradise."

"But your Breton soldiers," I contradicted. Baptiste laughed.

"Oh, they're pig-headed too, though the townspeople are better stuff, and, luckily, they were well led. But the finest men are the fishermen."

"Though in matters of the sea, I suppose you claim to be unprejudiced?" I interrupted.

"I try to be," replied Baptiste. "But you may judge for yourself."

We were walking down the village street during this conversation, and reached Baptiste's cottage. Imagine my surprise when, with an expression of unprintable profanity, Baptiste suddenly leapt his own gate and set off at a smart pace down his

garden path. Looking from the road, I could not see his objective but presently he returned, dragging by the collar a dirty urchin smeared with tears and fruit-juice.

"I will teach you to steal my plums," he exclaimed.

"Don't be hard on me, M'sieu," snivelled the boy.

"Not as hard as a stick," replied Baptiste, "here's a nice soft switch."

Holding him at arm's length, Baptiste administered elementary justice till the boy let out a piercing yell. Then he stopped.

"Now tell me," he said, "why did you do it?"

The boy's hands were occupied with his eyes, and the seat of his trousers respectively. His answer was incoherent.

"Don't you want to grow up a man?" pursued Baptiste. The boy nodded.

"And do men steal fruit?" The boy shook his head, but dubiously.

"Well?"

The boy looked puzzled.

"You haven't told me all."

"Only that I was hungry, M'sieu."

"Where is your father?"

"In the fields, M'sieu."

"And you have eaten to-day?"

"A piece of bread."

"And?"

"Nothing else, M'sieu."

"That does not excuse your stealing fruit, my young friend. But it does excuse your being hungry. Follow me."

The youngster looked as if he would bolt, but Baptiste's hand was firmly on his collar.

"Mother," he called out as they approached the house, "have you any soup?"

"Only enough for ourselves, Baptiste," replied

Madame from the interior of the kitchen. "Have you brought a visitor?"

"Yes."

He entered with the boy, and sat him down to the table.

"My soup, please, Mother," he said and handed it on to the urchin, watching him with a smile while it was wolfed down his throat.

"Now," he said when it was finished, "don't go stealing fruit. Those plums weren't ripe, and you will probably suffer again for it—which will teach you not to join the army of fools. Come back to-morrow night and I'll give you some more soup, on condition that you'll tell your father when you get home that you've been thrashed for stealing."

"Poor little devil," he exclaimed, as the boy ran up the road. And then he burst into a loud laugh. "Fancy my jumping that gate. And they said I wasn't fit!"

III

FROM Plouharnel a dusty road leads through Carnac and La Trinité to Locmariaquer, and what is curious about this road is that it joins two unsophisticated villages by means of two "resorts." Carnac and La Trinité have largely lost their picturesque interest in endeavours after financial prosperity. At Carnac are big hotels, at La Trinité two rather more modest establishments, but it is not these only that deprive their town of the Breton characteristics. No national tradition is safe against contamination by the "big world."

We arrived at La Trinité hot, dusty and empty, and, as temptation would have it, the first shop we saw was a little one-roomed cottage, a tiny patisserie—the kind of shop Miss Matty must have kept in Cranford—with a hedge of wild rose trees, and two real Miss Mattys inside, who served us with tiny

cakes carefully extracted out of tin boxes. They held up horror-stricken hands over the quantities of dust Helen managed to shake out of her clothing, and quite plainly looked upon me as a monster for making the poor girl walk so far.

"But Madame is tired," they exclaimed compassionately.

"A little," confessed Helen.

"Madame should not carry that load. Oh, it is heavy."

"It's the dust that makes one tired," laughed Helen "—and being hungry."

Cakes were immediately forthcoming in quite alarming quantities.

"Madame is not English?" asked one of them puzzled.

"Yes."

The two glanced at each other.

"But you do not dress like the English," said the one who had first put the question.

"Well, you see, we haven't a national costume like you Bretons."

"No, but I thought all English women carried gloves and a sunshade. They do here, at any rate."

"They're probably rich people who spend the summer here, then."

The old soul shrugged. "But isn't every English person rich?"

We all laughed at this. "I know a good many who aren't but who would give a lot for your riches," replied Helen. This made the couple arch their eyebrows in surprise. It was as if both of them suddenly had made the tremendous discovery that their goods—poor though they had thought them—were coveted by someone else—a very natural, if un-Christian, source of gratification.

"That bed, for instance," went on Helen, "we'd give anything for it in our country. And all your

old china and carved furniture. If you sold that in England, you'd make your fortune."

"Ah, but such furniture isn't made nowadays, even in Brittany, Madame. That is real Breton oak. But then all our old customs are going, and we shall soon be just like the rest of France. That was why I thought Madame couldn't be English—because she dressed differently from her countrywomen."

This gradual crumbling of national tradition was brought home to us again on the following day when La Trinité held its fête. There was dancing on the Quay to the music of the *biniou*—the Breton bagpipes—when the old Breton dances were revived. Yes, though I wrote the word inadvertently, it is the right one. Out of the crowd of three hundred inhabitants who gathered round, less than fifty took part during the whole evening—and these were the oldsters. I doubt whether a single man or woman under the middle thirties joined in. The Mayor, who acted as Master of Ceremonies, was inclined to be despondent.

"You can have no idea what changes the war has brought with it," he told me, as we sipped cider together during a well-merited interval. "The people even don't seem the same. I'm all for the old customs, I am—that's why I'm fostering these dances so carefully—but the folk here are smitten with the Parisian craze—'modern' dresses, you know; and look at those huzzies covered in paint and powder. They're the new school, who won't dress their children in the Breton costume—the school I'm fighting."

"With what success?" I asked.

He merely laughed cynically. "Listen," he said.

A table or two away a heated discussion was in progress between an old man and a young.

"I've led nearly every dance to-day," grumbled

the old man, "and nobody comes in with me. I'm tired of it."

"Never mind, father,"—this flippantly from the young one.

"Never mind, you say, eh?"—the old man's voice rose as another glass of cider descended.

"Why don't you help too, young man?"

"Oh, I don't know these dances."

"What! Don't know them?" the old man's voice had risen almost to a wail.

"Well, you know what I mean. We dance in a different style nowadays."

The old man snorted indignantly and went off to lead the next dance. The young man joined in the gavotte, dancing a waltz.

"You see," nodded the Mayor to me from the other side of the crowd.

I wonder how long it will be before Brittany ceases to be Brittany at all. Nationality is not to be the one good custom to corrupt the world.

IV

THIS story seems to have strayed a long way from its title. But not as far as you might imagine, for the district around the west side of the Morbihan is scattered with Coritons, and they are all hollyhocks in stature, as well as in horticultural tastes. Cousin Eugénie Gloannec, who lived at Locmariaquer, in a little house dated 1649, which opened directly on to the road, was able by encroaching on the public highway to find space for two bunches one on each side of the door. She was, moreover, a Coriton greatly to be feared, for she was the wealthy member of the family and from her secret box could dispense or withhold as she chose. Nor was she in the least afraid of expressing her opinion—her arms akimbo, her neck poked forward, the "visor" of her irreproachable cap fluttering excitedly

with every nod or shake of her head, she would tell anyone in the village what she thought of him in a voice tuned rather to the hurricane than to the church bells below which her cottage stood. Indeed, so loudly did she talk that it was frequently difficult to understand what she was saying.

But Cousin Gloannec was not all sound and fury. In her tempestuous way she could be kind. When a beggar knocked, one day, at her door, she gave him half a loaf (if the rest of the Coriton family hadn't been idiots enough to waste money, she declared, she might have given him a whole loaf, but one's own family was always a pack of fools and thieves): when, scenting further gifts, the same beggar paid a second visit, she emptied a bucket of fish-heads over him from the first-floor window, and told him to call on her nephew at La Trinité—he might have some money to spare if he hadn't spent it all on cider. She confided to Helen afterwards that she thought the fish-head method the surest one of making the beggar wash in hot weather, which would be a blessing both to himself and other people.

Cousin Gloannec must have had, too, a soft spot in her heart for Baptiste: though she never spoke of him with affection his recommendation succeeded several times in allowing her the privilege of changing her mind. We were an instance in point.

“*Mon Dieu*, what do you imagine! Do you think me a common lodging-house keeper, *par exemple*? The children want me to let them a room! *Nom de nom*, I have never heard the like”—and she regarded us with an outraged countenance.

“It was M. Coriton of Plouharnel who sent us,” I said.

“Indeed, M. Coriton of Plouharnel, was it? And

what right has he, I should like to know, to send chits of children to his cousin to beg for lodgings ? ”

“ He must have known your good-nature,” retorted Helen, who was tired and somewhat irritable.

“ I should think he must,” replied Cousin Gloannec fiercely. “ It’s a pity he didn’t know it sufficiently to put up little spit-fires like you himself.”

“ We have stayed with him for several days already.”

“ You don’t say so : he must have been hard up for money. What did he charge you ? ”

After some demur we named the modest sum Baptiste had accepted.

“ He was a fool,” opined Cousin Gloannec.

“ Suppose he’d wanted more ? ” I asked.

“ You’d have been the fool then,” she snapped.

“ Come inside, and I’ll see what I can do for you.”

She “ did for us ” very handsomely : her big oak ceiling beams and brass-studded oak furniture, carved this way and that by quaint Breton craftsmen, were sheer dreams of delight. Her embroidered linen and bed canopy made Helen gasp. The candle which lit us to bed was held in a brass candlestick of formidable dimensions and polish, and after it had been blown out the yellow moon-beams filtered through the window to invest the whole resplendent room with the weird mystery of dead-and-gone Gloannecs. The entire family seemed to pass in review before our eyes as the light shifted gradually from one object to another.

And in the next room its only surviving representative was snoring like a steam-engine.

At half-past six next morning we were awakened by a tremendous knocking at the door. Cousin Gloannec entered with a breakfast tray.

“ They shall be spoiled, the little dears,” she roared at us, “ and have their breakfast brought up to bed for them. And understand, please,

that I want to tidy this room in an hour, and if you aren't out of it by then I shall march in and begin working no matter what you're doing. I can't have quite all my household arrangements upset for your M. Coriton of Plouharnel."

When we returned from a muddy and rather crab-ridden bathe, she was awaiting us with her head poked far out of the window.

"No, you don't," she bellowed. "Now that I've cleaned this place you won't bring your dirty things in here. Just take them round to the back and hang them on the line."

As "the back" comprised a dung-heap and a cow-house, Helen objected. Cousin Gloannec became almost beside herself: she trembled with rage as she denounced us from our own bedroom window. She reminded me of some High Church dignitary pronouncing excommunication.

". . . now will you take them round the back," she concluded her tirade.

"No," said Helen stoutly.

"I don't wonder Baptiste turned you out," she shrieked. "I've a good mind to do the same myself."

"You needn't trouble," replied Helen, marching in at the front door, upstairs and entering the bedroom.

"Hasn't she got a temper?" asked Cousin Gloannec of me. "One might have thought I meant it." She faced Helen again. "Don't be a little cat."

But Helen did not answer.

"Just stop that packing."

"If you'll apologise," said Helen, continuing.

A sudden gleam of admiration came into Cousin Gloannec's eyes.

"*Ditadonc*," she exclaimed. "You're the best Coriton of them all."

Could one have an ampler apology? After that we fraternised to such an extent that no harsh word was again hurled at our offending heads. Indeed, Cousin Gloannec became even confiding.

"As for Baptiste," she told me one day, "he's all right, you know, but he takes the death of his sons hardly—foolish, I call it. As soon as they went into the Navy I said to him, 'Baptiste, mark my words, those boys won't come back.' He only laughed at the time; but I knew I was right. After all, what has one got to do in war except be killed? And even if they had by chance come back, they'd have been killed somehow else. So that I don't see what Baptiste has to make so much fuss about."

"But your own children?"

"Ah yes, I suppose you're right," she said. "I've never had any. I'm an inhuman old beast to talk like that."

This was the only time she betrayed emotion. And as she had no cabbages to water, she had to cover it by an extra polish to the big brass candlestick.

XIX

THE PEASANTS AND THE PAINTER

AFTER we had left roaring Cousin Gloannec, the calm was so pronounced that we entered willy-nilly upon a period of peaceful stagnation. We sat for hours beside hot Brittany roads, sprinkled by the dust of motors and moving only when forced to. We were still happily idling when we discovered ourselves in financial drought.

"I'm afraid I shall have to take to work again," I said despondently.

"That will be a pity," commiserated Helen.

So in Auray, with the help of old guide-books, casual conversations with local worthies and a few execrable photographs, I wrote a short guide to the megaliths of the district for the benefit of English visitors. To my surprise it was snapped up by an enterprising jobbing printer who paid me well and turned it into incomprehensible rubbish. Over my attempted corrections I bit my nails to the flesh and wore my pencil to the merest stump: I argued with my employer, pleaded, bullied, pointed out that he was making a fool both of himself and of me—but in vain. He answered obstinately that he was the proud owner of the only English guide-book to Auray. I forbade him to allow my name to appear in connection with it, and went on my way with modified rejoicing.

But it was by Jules Delaunay that we were really roused out of our lethargy. He had just

turned his back on the schools and the Quartier Latin so full of ideas for the regeneration of the painter's craft that it seemed as if his head must burst with them. On no two days, however, were his ideas the same: a disciple of Corot one day, of Picasso the next, of Fra Angelico the third, and of some unknown Messiah of Montmâre the fourth, he would flaunt his latest gospel in our faces with picturesque oaths and a whirl of arms. To keep still seemed impossible to him when he enthused; but at other times he would stare at a bed of flowers for twenty minutes without moving a muscle.

"I am going to Concarneau," he cried one day. "I start in an hour. Will you visit Mecca with me?"

It appears to be a convention among painters—or is it among the public on whom they are half dependent?—that Concarneau is the be-all and end-all of Brittany. It is assuredly a delightful place (more attractive at high tide than at low), but there seemed to us little to justify its preference to the exclusion of such other places as Vannes or La Rochelle; yet we had not seen a single easel in either town as compared with the dozens we found at Concarneau. Pont Aven, beloved of artists, is utterly disappointing; Pont l'Abbé . . . but perhaps I am exposing appalling Philistinism. Yet even a Philistine . . .

But Jules was emphatic in his assertion that the mere public were unable to judge a picture: except, that is, during his Tolstoian periods when he declared with equal emphasis that they were the sole arbiters of good taste. As mood followed mood we wrangled heatedly and verbosely. And meanwhile the other artists went on working.

They clustered round the old-world town in the harbour like flies round a honey-pot, looking with eyes of many nationalities at its stately beauty. The pictures upon which they daily lavished them-

selves were good, bad, and most of them indifferent : the best of all was from the brush of a Japanese. His every spot of paint sparkled with light, and he whistled as he worked. It is a great mistake to take yourself seriously in such a business.

That was where Jules went wrong—he was out to reform the world, and succeeded (on canvas) only in making it a much worse world than it is. He never whistled as he worked : and his work suffered.

But in one respect Jules was right—when he took his cue from his countryman J. F. Millet. He painted the peasant as he saw him, and not with the pretty conventional picturesqueness of his confrères.

“He’s a clodhopping fool, you know, is the Breton peasant,” he exclaimed to me—“dirty and conservative, ignorant and hopelessly poor. Why not paint him so ? His costumes—they’re gorgeous in colouring and design, but they’re wicked for those who have to wear them : abolish them and you’d halve the number of cripples in Brittany : but of course the children are cripples when the women wear such abominations. For myself I refuse to spread the idea that such things are desirable and to be perpetuated when I know, and you know, and everybody who thinks for himself knows perfectly well that they’re a sin against France.”

“But are these moral considerations the artist’s job ?” I asked.

“Certainly. If a butcher sold bad meat you’d call him a rogue : if I sold a picture that reeked with beastliness—as I should do if I painted these costumes—I should be a rogue too. If I were to paint an open sewer nobody would buy the picture : but, *nom de nom*, it would at least be frank. This method of visiting the sins of the parents on the

children and calling it picturesque is like sprinkling eau-de-cologne on the sewer and saying how nice it smells."

"But your own Millet isn't as hard on the peasant as you are."

"Am I hard on him, *mon ami*, if I call him a fool and pig when he is one? I didn't pretend my analysis to be complete. He's a dear old fool because he knows no better, just as you and everybody else are fools: it's only a term of reproach when the person who uses it thinks himself superior. Millet didn't: he knew we're all a pack of fools together, and the peasant exhibiting a certain phase of foolishness, Millet painted it. But it was the peasant he painted, not his costumes and trappings and barbarities. He left all that sort of thing to the bigger fools who have nothing better to do than to potter round the outside because they don't know the peasant himself.

"Look here," he said on another occasion, "I'll show you what I mean."

Five minutes with a pencil produced an old man with a face like a hard dry apple, his hair falling over his elaborately embroidered tunic, his pleated breeches so baggy above his spindle-like legs that they seemed to belong to a different being. He leant heavily on his stick as he walked, the buckles on his shoes flashing in the sunlight. It was a wonderfully vivid impression of a type you may see any day in Brittany.

In the succeeding five minutes Jules produced a different picture.

The apple face and long hair were the same: but sabots replaced the buckled shoes and coarsely patched, ill-fitting smock and trousers, the elaborate costume of the companion sketch. You looked not at the clothes but at the man. It was an equally vivid impression of a type you may see any

day in Brittany—and pass over because it is so common.

“Now then,” asked Jules, “which of those is the real peasant?” I indicated the second.

“Where did you learn the Breton peasant so intimately?” I said, looking into the kindly face of the sketch. Every line Jules had put on to the paper was alive with respect for his subject; nothing was overlooked, nothing exaggerated. It shone with intimate knowledge.

“It’s my father,” said Jules simply. “You see I can speak both as peasant—a lucky one I admit—and as painter. And when you go into these cottages of Brittany, count how many secular pictures you see that aren’t Millets. The peasant knows his worth, never fear. These little summer artists . . . !”

XX

IN THE CITY OF WATERSMEET

I

IF you feel inclined to envy the birds, it must be at Quimper, for the jackdaws and the swallows see so much more of its beauty from the air than ever it will be your luck to see from the ground. The whole charm of Quimper lies in its roofs tumbled hither and thither as by a gigantic whirlwind, bearing, sometimes, no apparent relation to the houses they cover, gossiping over the narrow roadways, leaning against one another for mutual support or standing in splendid isolation until age or the hand of the renovator sweeps them away.

Although, as at Vannes, the restorer has acted both leniently and judiciously. In both towns you may wander along the streets and, in their unaltered facings, meet the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. But in Quimper the pressure of business has transformed the lower stories of many houses into smart little shops ; only the roofs remain in their original best style. And under this picturesque hat, which you may see from the shaded walks on the hillside near the Odet, strut all the comedy and tragedy that together make up the theatrically natural life of France.

II

✓ It was in Quimper that we found a cat.

It is difficult to give this new friend a nice cut-and-dried sort of name. You don't christen cats

as you do babies; no family quarrel arises as to whether they shall be Cicely, after the grandmother, or Jane, after the great-aunt. Their name grows up with them, and nobody can say with certainty who was the first to fix on it; in short, to name a cat is usually a serious matter, occupying much time and attention, and when we first met him, Methuselah was only one day old.

I wish Helen wasn't so impetuous—she made me bring out the name in the first few lines, when I had meant to keep it back as a specimen of her wit. For it was she who pounced upon both the kitten and the name as soon as she entered the photographer's shop.

"Just look," she cried, enraptured, "there's Methuselah, bless his little heart!" And in less time than it takes to say it, the tiny blind bit of white fluff was crawling about her lap, uttering piteous "miaows" full of the most intense surprise at life, while Mother—Julienne was her name—lashed the air vigorously with her tail, and sprang lightly from table to chair, and from chair to table in her anxiety for Baby. After a good deal of persuasion Helen was induced to part with Methuselah; his mother seized him in her careful mouth, and he was soon recovering from the first rude shock of his twenty-four hours' existence.

If Baby had been disturbed, so had the silent routine of the shop. Helen's entrance was altogether like a whirlwind. The two girls industriously retouching portraits dropped their brushes, a third behind the counter clutched some unmounted prints; I could almost have imagined that a portly gentleman, who was at the moment transacting some business, seized his hat with both hands to prevent it from blowing away. M. Lozach, the fussy proprietor in spreading black bow and tortoiseshell-rimmed spectacles dashed from his room

at the back ; and ten minutes later, when we were safely installed as lodgers and Helen had been subtly warned by our landlord not to do it again, work was on the point of nervously recommencing.

"But you shouldn't have such sweet little kittens," expostulated Helen.

"*Eh bien*," replied the photographer, "we cannot help them. Three months ago it was a black kitten ; this time it is white, one speculates——" and he shrugged his shoulders.

"Where is the black ?" asked Helen, full of expectation.

"In the Paradise of pussies, Madame."

This was a crushing blow, but it had the advantage of allowing Helen to concentrate all her energies on Methuselah. Whether Methuselah fully appreciated this is to be doubted. At first, at any rate, he was very much in the dark as to what it was that seized him so often by the scruff of his neck, whirled him through the air and deposited him with a bump on a substance entirely foreign to his experience. Even when his eyes were opened, and he was able to follow with more intelligence the course of events, he expressed no actual relish : his miaowing was as heart-rending as ever, and Julianne's anxiety little the less. But it seemed as if he did achieve some sort of familiarity with Helen's dress : his struggles became less frantic and at last he would curl up in a lonely kind of way and try to sleep.

Helen's boisterous entrance into M. Lozach's shop, however much it was resented by everyone present, had a decisive influence upon the life of Methuselah. For up to that moment nobody, probably, had given him more than a passing glance—Julienne's cunning in choosing a dark cupboard had assured that. But as soon as Helen began to fuss over the kitten he became the pivotal point

around which the entire world of the shop moved. Lozach himself, his cherubic face beaming and his hands covered in chemicals, would run at intervals from his dark room or the bureau to "have a chat with *le p'tit Mathusalem*"—the "chat" consisting of horrifying gurgles uttered a quarter of an inch from the kitten's ear—one of the assistants would tear herself away from work to utter exclamations of surprise at his rapid development; even customers were introduced to him by name.

And that is how he came to know M. Larousse.

M. Larousse, as an important man at the Préfecture, was a person of considerable social standing and was at times painfully aware of the fact. But at others, thank goodness, he forgot it, and when sufficiently unbent was a genuine lover of animals. He took to Methuselah immediately, put him through a searching examination and pronounced him a healthy specimen.

"*Tenez*," he exclaimed. "I suppose he will follow his black brother?"

Now M. Lozach's heart was torn, at this time, between his appreciation of domestic arrangements—two cats are apt to be a nuisance about the house—and a growing affection for this latest arrival. He hedged therefore.

"Perhaps yes; perhaps no," he replied. "One cannot say."

"It is a pity that he should," pursued M. Larousse.

"Most things in this world are a pity," replied the photographer.

The next day Larousse paid another visit.

"I have just dropped in to pay my respects to Methuselah," he said. "One must do what one can for the dying."

"What do you mean?" asked Lozach, plainly disturbed.

"You told me you were going to drown him."

"Did I, really? Then I have changed my mind. No, I am not going to drown him."

"*Dites, donc!*" exclaimed Larousse absently-mindedly.

His visits after this became regular, which was curious, because at each one he found greater and greater fault with Methuselah. The kitten he had at first pronounced so healthy seemed to be dwindling and fading to a skeleton before our eyes.

"One may, of course, always make a mistake," he pleaded in extenuation. "I thought him good, but he has disappointed me. His mother must be unhealthy, I think."

"Well, well, well," moaned Lozach, "since Larousse, who is an expert, thinks so little of him I suppose I had better let him join his brother in Paradise." And he began to gaze long and shudderingly at the river.

"Are you determined to drown him?" asked Helen one day, fondling Methuselah in her arms.

"Alas! yes, Madame. It is better to put him out of his misery."

"It seems almost wicked. He is such a dear little thing."

"I know it, Madame. I am desolated at the thought."

"Listen, M'sieur. If I can promise him a good home, will you let me have him?"

"But is it in his own interest to let him go on living?"

"I will do all that is possible for him. Please, M. Lozach, sell him to me."

"For what, Madame?"

"What you will."

"Five francs?"

"It is a bargain."

"Good Heavens!" I exclaimed, "what do you want a cat for, my dear girl?"

Helen's only reply was a violent kick on my ankle. Without further comment I paid the five francs.

Methuselah now lives a sleek life in M. Larousse's home, with M. Lozach none the wiser. But I'm surprised at Helen lending herself to such deception.

III

CLAIRE DELAHAYE hated the Germans with a concentrated passion that was the fuel of her life. It is little to be wondered at.

Imagine a woman, refined, gentle, in easy circumstances, accustomed since her childhood to a wide circle of congenial companionship, suddenly robbed of everyone she held dear by the hand of the hereditary enemy, and you have a picture of Claire Delahaye, *débitante*, of Quimper, the only survivor of her family after the Great War.

Her loss had been catastrophic. Husband and two brothers had been killed at the front; father had been blown to pieces by a bomb in Paris and mother had died from shock; her little son, born soon after the war had commenced, overshadowed from the first by tragedy, deprivation and semi-starvation, terminated his little existence on Armistice Day. Throughout the four years of slaughter friend after friend had "gone west," and Claire's closest confidante, unable to stand the strain of such times, was now in an asylum. Claire herself had ruined her health as an Army nurse. The family resources, invested largely in Russian securities, had dwindled almost to nothing, with but remote probability of recovery.

Written thus baldly, the series is complete enough, but Claire, by an heroic effort of will, could have recovered something of her composure: it was the

final blow—that of having to degrade herself to a *débitante*, and if not actually serving behind the counter at least spend her days in the shop—which turned her from a tired and stricken woman into a virago. Her pride, not for herself but for her family, was shattered; and out of her debasement there flamed a scorching hatred of those whom, rightly or wrongly, she conceived to be the authors of her misfortunes. No one could enter into a conversation with her without having to hear a torrent of invective against Germany; every action she performed was inspired by vindictive hate; she had no mercy for any moderating influence in international affairs, despised England, and when she discovered our nationality, shut the door in our faces. The greatest pleasure of her life, she openly declared, would be to see rows of Germans shot down by machine guns, or because that would be too easy a death, left herded in stinking pens to starve. Any French soldier who entered her *Débit de Vins* was sure of a welcome, as much free drink as he could swallow and a fervent exhortation to allow nothing to stand in his way of punishing “*les sales bêtes*” if chance should bring him into contact with them.

Nothing enraged Claire more than when I once described Germany as “our late enemy.”

“It is false!” she cried shrilly. “They have been our enemies for fifty years—did not my father fight them? They are our enemies now, waiting like tigers to spring upon us as soon as they see their opportunity. They must be crushed—utterly crushed out of existence, the robbers. . . .

“You English—” pointing an accusing finger at me—“you boasted your way through the war, and now, *mon Dieu*, you want to make friends with them because, you say, it is good for trade. As if there was nothing in the world but trade and busi-

ness and money! Despicable creatures that you are! Do you not know what it is to hate with your whole mind and your whole soul, so that money and trade and affairs are nothing—nothing!—so that the very name of Germany stinks in your nostrils and your children's nostrils for ever—so that you are consumed and burned up with hatred of those who killed your menfolk by treachery and spying and torture?—yes, and your womenfolk too. Do you cold-blooded English know what it is to hate like that, or are your low minds thinking only about your pounds, and your stocks and shares, and your markets?"

"Some of us," I replied, "know what it is to hate."

"You lie!" she cried. "You are traitors and renegades, you English, playing a dirty game—thinking only of your own interests. You do not hate."

"It is war that we hate," I said, "and we hate it with all the loathing one has for a foul disease."

"What do you know of war? Were your homes ruined, and your fields pillaged; your old men shot down, and your young women outraged?"

"You in France have a better reason to hate it, Madame," I answered, "and your children the best reason of all."

"And those that made it—your friends, the Germans."

"Not my friends," I retorted. "I spent four years fighting them."

"Get outside—quick—before I put you out—you Englishman!" cried Claire, trembling with passion. It was then that she slammed the door after us, and through its glass panels we could see her return to her desk and break into a torrent of sobbing.

Claire Delahaye had grounds for her hatred such

✓ as we in England will never fully understand. But can Europe afford these melancholy luxuries ?

IV

THE cry of fire is one of the most stirring that can be heard when uttered by strong men in alarm. It was four o'clock on a drizzling morning when the half-dozen cried it along the streets of Quimper.

Lights appeared at the windows of houses : questions were shouted and hurriedly answered : more men were heard passing to and fro, and still more men : at the barracks opposite, the bugle sounded ; and gradually there spread along the roofs and up the church tower the light of fire. Within ten minutes of the alarm the spire stood out as clearly as in daylight.

Four o'clock is not a convenient time to rise, but there is something elemental about a fire which dispels all thought of sleep. Besides, the burning building was only a few yards away and the light breeze was blowing the sparks alarmingly in our direction. As we slipped on our clothes the tramp of the fire-picket from the barracks and the hurried passing of appliances somewhat restored confidence. We gathered together our few worldly goods, and descended sheepishly into the road.

✓ The roof where the fire had originated was, by this time, a mass of flame and by its light the household goods, or such as could be snatched, were being dumped in the small square in front. A sleepy crowd had been attracted to the scene and were held at a safe distance by a dozen soldiers with fixed bayonets—which was caution indeed when one realised that the crowd wasn't awake enough to be excited. Meanwhile a fierce argument was in progress between the Commandant of the Town Fire Brigade, the Commandant of the Railway Fire Brigade, and the Subaltern who commanded

the Military Fire Picket. Their respective helmets twinkled and flashed in the light of the flames as they gesticulated amongst themselves.

"I should take charge of the whole affair," argued the Subaltern, secure in the pre-eminence of the military status in France.

"In a military fire, yes," replied the Commandant of the Town Brigade, "but this is a civil outbreak and, therefore, my affair."

"But one of the lodgers works on the railway," expostulated the Railway Brigade Commander. "I must look after his goods." His retirement was almost due, and he wanted to make the most of what might be a last chance.

The Subaltern, however, was stiff-necked; the Town Brigade man stuck to his point; only the Railway Brigade Commandant seemed to be out of the running. The argument increased in vehemence; the men themselves, who had all this while been standing by smoking cigarettes, began to feel that they were called upon to take part. One felt the situation might develop: when two events, one after another, altered the course of things.

The roof fell in.

The August Personage arrived.

The immediate consequence of the former was that the top storey began to blaze; of the latter that the argument was subdued. The August Personage, after hearing the case put forward by each of the three parties, decided to take charge himself.

The fire seemed to realise something was about to happen, for it blazed with increased fury. The August Personage took off his coat.

"To begin with," he said, "we must have a hose and quite a lot of water."

A hydrant was found at last and the stand-pipe of the hose adjusted. But the couplings had been

so highly polished for a recent inspection that they slipped and, moreover, nobody seemed absolutely certain how they fitted.

"I think it's like this," said one fireman, galvanised at last into activity.

"Not a bit of it," replied his companion. "I remember doing it like this, rather."

"Well, I've been to a fire since you, so I ought to know better."

"When was that . . . ?"

Somehow the couplings were joined, and squads of men worked on the pumps like maniacs. Nothing resulted.

From the rear of the building, however, appeared a feeble squirt of water, which missed the seat of the fire, but drenched the pumpers in the square. A message was quickly sent round to stop it.

As the result of five minutes' assiduous effort, a jet was at last started from the front, which just reached the first floor (hitherto undamaged). A few minutes later, a second—but the fire only wondered who was tickling it and blazed the more merrily. Then the August Personage had his inspiration.

"A chain!" he cried. "We will have a chain of buckets."

Obedient to his command, gendarmes made sudden raids into the crowd bringing back by the scruff of the neck such young men as had not managed to escape them. With the help of these "volunteers," a chain was made between a canal near-by and the pumps. Buckets passed along . . . the fire began at last to feel uncomfortable . . . half a dozen hose-pipes were working furiously . . . men were sweating and cursing . . . as the morning broke, the fire gave up the ghost.

"Among those present," we read next day in the local paper, "were the 'August Personage,' who, by his promptness, diverted a greater catastrophe ;

the Colonel and Officers of the — Infantry; the Prefect; the Inspector of Departmental Police, in whose hands order was perfectly kept; the Inspector of Town Police; the Inspector of Railway Police; the Military Picket; the Town Fire Brigade; and the Railway Fire Brigade."

We had unwittingly been present at a social function!

XXI

THE CRIME OF AMÉLIE LE COIC

THERE had been no end of a commotion in the remote little village of Hanvec, in the neighbourhood of Brest, because Amélie le Coic wanted to marry a tailor.

And why shouldn't she? There seems no more reason for fuss than if she had wanted to marry a soldier, sailor, tinker, or anybody else in the list down to the candlestick-maker. Think over such of your friends as are tailors and see whether they are not harmless inoffensive little men whose sharpest point is in the pins in the bottom of their waistcoat and whose only objectionable habit is that of rubbing chalk down the back of your shoulder blades (which is all for your own good). It has always seemed to me to require a clever man to keep up his end of perfunctory conversation with a mouth full of pins and a head full of measurements. And, in the domestic sphere, do tailors make bad husbands?—a subject which might well be debated in the daily or weekly Press.

But there was no Press in Hanvec to air the pros and cons: that was done with sufficient thoroughness by the village itself. For marriage with a tailor was a thing unheard of in Brittany and to place tailors in a class apart is still the tradition in the remoter districts of the province. In Hanvec the scandal waxed for two months before the old women, baffled by the ingenuity of Amélie,

gradually let it drop, muttering into their toothless jaws that no good could come of such a match. But Amélie tossed her head and laughed.

Yet if she was dealing a blow at fast fading tradition, Yves Yvenec, the other party to the scandal, had already struck the first. It is true that he still made his regular rounds of the farm houses on horseback, wearing his black velvet hat, short jacket with velvet facings and occasionally his resplendent red and yellow embroidered waistcoat. But he did this, avowedly, because they brought custom among the conservative elements of the countryside and not because he favoured their general use: when he returned to his workshop in Landerneau he would cast them gratefully into a corner and hurl imprecations after them, laugh quietly to himself at his own folly, tuck up his sleeves and settle down to work. His open defiance of tradition was in refusing to follow the practice whereby the village tailor is the professional proposer of marriage, acting on behalf of the lover by serenading his choice outside her window, offering her a sprig of genista, and then making the formal declaration of love. Yves declared that the lover who resorted to a professional mediator was not worthy to be the husband of any girl, and described the whole business as tomfoolery.

But when, being as other men, Yves desired to take unto himself a wife, he found tradition a solid wall to bar his progress. To the countryside he was a tailor rather than a man; or at best a tailor as well as a man, one whose professional duties brought him into close contact with both men and women. And how, argued tradition, could anyone, who had constantly to make women's as well as men's clothes, and who was forced to measure women's as well as men's bodies, keep his mind true to one woman? Besides, travelling as he did

from farm to farm, every item of scandal and gossip could not fail to reach him, would doubtless be passed on to his wife and make her dangerous even among her own sex. Tradition put its foot down firmly: Yves and such as he must remain single.

Only Amélie thought differently: she was ready to believe that a man could be true to his wife even if tailor he be, that his talk need not consist only of scandal, in short that he was man first and tailor second. She was a fool, said Hanvec: tradition was not invented in a day, but had grown up out of generations of experience. To which Amélie answered that her experience, too, would influence tradition. She did not boast of the risks she was taking, but quietly accepted them: if things turned out all right she would be able to go on laughing at the croaking wiseacres, if not—well, it would not be because Yves was a tailor: all marriage was a lottery.

As the day approached the odds wavered somewhat: there had been such unanimity in the village discussion, either that the match would turn out disastrously or be broken off at the last minute, that they could not, as it were, keep up the steep price at which they had started. A little doubt crept in as to whether the favourite was all he was thought to be: whether the other horse hadn't a faint chance of a place.

"They're running in the face of Providence," declared Mother Sadout emphatically, "you'll live to see their downfall."

"Maybe," agreed Mother Huet.

"There's no marriage with a tailor that's turned out well yet," continued Mother Sadout.

"Maybe," repeated Mother Huet, "but I don't remember such a one myself."

"Well, you know well enough without thinking.

It's a thing you can be sure of, with tailors as they are."

"Can you?" queried Mother Huet.

"Of course you can."

"Maybe." But Mother Huet was not quite convinced.

"I don't pity either of them," went on Mother Sadout vigorously, in spite of her seventy-eight years, "if she were my daughter I'd forbid it."

"Ah, but children aren't what they used to be," wailed Mother Huet.

"She shouldn't marry him, anyway."

"Maybe." Mother Huet was still less convinced.

Mother Huet's "maybe" represented the advanced element in Hanvec, and it was to her side that recruits came. Even Mother Sadout's emphatic certainty became weaker as the fulfilment of her first prognostication—that of the breaking off of the match—was delayed; but she concentrated with all the more vigour on her prophecy of disaster to the couple. She recalled, out of her many memories, the confused recollection of having heard from a friend about a girl who had married a tailor and who had been deserted by him—and this evidence was accepted by her party as conclusive. Papa Rosnic, who claimed to be the village's oldest inhabitant, remembered another case—or, on second thoughts, was it the same? At any rate, the consequences had been similar; and who would be bold enough to say that history would not repeat itself? Not he, nor Mother Sadout, nor even, in any definite manner, Mother Huet. The most that could be done was to watch.

Day by day, however, Mother Huet's camp grew in strength. With the exception of a few irreconcilables, the whole village grew to familiarity with the watchword "Maybe."

Then came the news which struck consternation

into the hearts of both sides : it was the biggest blow that had yet fallen. I heard it from the lips of Papa Rosnic himself.

He was leaning over his gate, muttering and gesticulating like one bereft of reason. His pipe, which had been forgotten, waggled up and down in his mouth and his wrinkled forehead was beaded with sweat. Both hands worked convulsively.

"Have you heard?" he cried as I approached. "The hussy that she is!"

"What's the matter?"

"What's the matter! You haven't heard then? I can't understand it at all—why she consented to it. Not being content with one scandal. . . ."

"I don't follow you," I interrupted.

"Of course you don't. Well then, it's this. The le Coic girl says she won't have anybody to her wedding who isn't necessary. She isn't going to have a feast or a dance or anything of that sort. She says she's tired of us all and wants to get her wedding over quietly."

Mother Sadout came up, winded but indignant.

"Amélie is a little cat," she wheezed, "she thinks she's clever. But I don't mind, not me! I've seen plenty of weddings in my time, I have, and better ones than Amélie's."

"It does seem a pity though," chimed in Mother Huet, "it's so nice to watch, is a wedding."

"It's the last straw," snorted Mother Sadout. "I always said it'll turn out badly; now I mean it."

Amélie, in response to all this contumely, shrugged her shoulders wearily.

"It's no use trying to please people," she said. "I thought that as you were so shocked at my marrying a tailor you'd at least appreciate my keeping it quiet."

But tradition isn't as simple an affair as that.

XXII

KERGOSIEN THE BUTCHER

I

MORLAIX isn't a town: it's a viaduct. It joins two hills; it joins many centuries. Old heavy-wheeled carts lumber through its streets; screaming trains, two hundred feet up in the air, dash across its enormous bridge. Paris and London fashions are well represented; so are the fashions of Breton tradition. Had Morlaix, by any chance, forgotten to chose a coat of arms, I would blazon one for it:—vert (for that is the colour of the hills and countryside); a Breton hat, proper; a motor car rampant; over all, a viaduct, or—— If such a shield does not comply with the tenets of heraldry (and I am told it does not) it still describes all one needs to know about Morlaix.

Morlaix is a place one visits, not to see, but to pass through: paradoxically it is called a "centre." The towns and scenery in its district are considered to be of greater interest than Morlaix itself, so one devotes a couple of hours and a spare evening to looking at what lies immediately in front of one, and many days in chasing the elusive sprite of the picturesque. One has to travel outside to find that Morlaix itself is worth seeing. Again the viaduct with its double track is descriptive.

You can't get away from it. It is a bigger thing than any of the church spires: it overawes the town with a domination of the material against which

they protest in vain. The old houses, of which there are some fine specimens in Morlaix, count as nothing beside it: it is modern and useful while they are out of date and exist on suffrance. It is the symbol of a Brittany, divested of its conservatism and reaction, its poverty and pride, opening its treasures to the outside world and saying "I am worth looking at. Enter." The trains, snorting and screaming their way across, wake the sleepy town at night and during the day drown the rattle of the country market carts on the cobblestones. They are, as it were, bearing the strangers over the chasm that once separated Brittany from the rest of France, so close a corporation was she. They cross the viaduct, and then the tourists make their excursions into the countryside, take their snapshots, write their picture postcards and move on without suspecting that within a dozen yards of the station they were face to face with the most significant fact that the whole district had to offer.

Morlaix isn't a town: it's a viaduct.

II

THIS is to celebrate an Englishman who, while in the wrong, was tremendously in the right. He knocked a man down for being less than a man. It was not until later that I learned the Englishman's name, for he was led away between two gendarmes. This is how it happened.

Saturday is market day in Morlaix and Kergosien (that at least was the name on the cart) had done well in securing five well-reared fat calves. Kergosien was a butcher; and looked it.

He tied the feet of the poor brutes together and slung them into the back of the cart, while he went to fill his own belly with cider. It was a hot day, and he wanted it—quite a lot, in fact, before his thirst was quenched—; but it did not occur to

him that the calves he had left in the glaring sun might be equally hot and thirsty, and that they had no cider, not even water. They had nothing to do except to gaze, head downward, over the tail-board, and to utter occasional plaintive mooings, varied with ineffectual struggles to free their legs : one does not obtain a very kindly view of life when one's head is below the level of one's tethered feet. But what did that matter anyhow : they were going to be killed in a few hours.

Kergosien met some old friends in the buvette, and had naturally much to tell them. His narration became so long-winded and his thirst so fiery that he did not notice the passage of the hours, and it was the middle of the afternoon before he suddenly remembered that his horse had not been watered. He rose unsteadily, begged a pail, which he filled at the street pump, and gave his horse to drink : he was still sober enough to know that if anything happened to Jacques he would have to pay a stiff price to replace him (You wouldn't have thought so to see him : but Kergosien knew better) and that he must, therefore, be looked after.

When Jacques at last lifted a grateful head from the bucket, his master, instead of throwing away the remainder, carelessly placed it on a high stone by the tail-board of the cart before kicking a stray cat and returning to his refreshment. The smell of water was sweet in the dilated nostrils of the nearest calf : a human being, much less an animal, could not have withstood the temptation. There was a desperate struggle in the cart . . . and the bucket fell with a crash.

Kergosien, rushing from the buvette, took in the situation on the instant : the agony of the calf alone would have told him. He raised his whip, and brought it down fiercely upon the helpless

animal. He repeated the blow and still the whip was raised. The calf cried and struggled, but Kergosien was seeing red.

Two gendarmes looked on apathetically. . . .

Nobody knew exactly where the Englishman came from : he appeared as an angel might suddenly appear out of nowhere. But, unlike an angel, he was almost foaming at the mouth with rage.

"You cad," he cried to Kergosien.

Kergosien did not understand in the least what he was talking about, but there was no mistaking his expression. The butcher thought it well to stay his hand.

But the Englishman seized the whip.

"You swine!" he said to him : the wrath was gone now, and a calm, which seemed to the excitable French crowd even more dangerous, had taken its place. He might have been holding a confidential talk with Kergosien from the quiet way in which he uttered the words.

Then recollecting his situation, he tried to express himself in bad French, but contemptuously throwing it aside, broke out again in English.

"I'll teach you to do that sort of thing, you damned cur," he said in his quiet voice. "I'm going to give you the biggest thrashing you ever had in your life."

The surrounding crowd deemed it well to keep at a safe distance : the Englishman, tearing off the lash of the whip, brought the stick down on Kergosien's back with such force that the accumulated dust of Brittany high roads rose like a cloud into the air.

Kergosien was no fool and was, moreover, furious at such interference with his rights as a free citizen of France : weren't the calves his to do what he liked with ? His silence, hitherto, had been due solely to the fact that he couldn't make out what

all the fuss was about : but a blow is a blow. He landed a straight one at the Englishman's chest.

The Englishman dropped the whip, estimated his distance for a fraction of a second—and Kergosien's seventeen stone was lying its bulky length beneath the cart and the calves.

The Englishman turned on his heel, but as the crowd fell back the two gendarmes, spying from their safe corner that damage had been done to a French subject, hustled up. A long colloquy ensued most of which was inaudible: I heard the words "if Monsieur will accompany us"; the Englishman nodded and the little party of three, followed by the curious crowd, turned the corner.

I am glad to say that nobody was sufficiently interested to look after Kergosien. He just lay there . . . and for all I care he may be lying there still.

III

It was in Morlaix that the little café waiter delivered his epigram. "What is wrong with France is that one is allowed too much personal liberty."

Thinking of Kergosien and the calves, of various unseemly fights for tickets at booking-offices, of the vision of a beautiful lady in a fashionable hotel picking a flea from her arm and letting it drop casually to the floor, of other and more repulsive incidents which passed without the least protest from the Frenchmen who witnessed them, I agreed.

"It is the ruin of France," I said. "You are the most charming nation in the world, and among civilised peoples the most uncouth and undisciplined. What on earth does your conscription teach you?"

In the distance came the sound of artillery

proclaiming the opening of a fête. I remembered the bayonets and sentries at the fire in Quimper.

Perhaps I knew the answer before I put the question.

IV

IN St. Pol de Léon you leave Brittany altogether and return to an English cathedral town. Amid its dignified eighteenth century houses with their restful walled gardens and their charming vistas and glimpses of the twin towers of the old cathedral, you breathe the out-of-the-world atmosphere which belongs to Ely and Wells. Or you half expect to find somewhere in the vicinity an English public school. . . .

Though when you look at the tall, almost top-heavy tower of the Chapelle du Kreisker, you imagine yourself in Flanders, and wait in vain for the chiming of the carillon. Wherever you go, in the surrounding country or from the sea, the tower stands out conspicuously: in the middle of a plain it seems a ladder climbing to Heaven.

All the more so because, just as the theologians would have us believe, the earth from which it climbs is a very dirty earth. All the charm of St. Pol de Léon is spoiled by the slackness of the municipal authorities. Flies abound in swarms—they descend on you like the falling of a black wall, devour your food and person in numbers impossible to estimate. There are other things too—and more of them than Noah took with him officially into the Ark.

They have, of course, a market in St. Pol de Léon. It is held on Tuesday, and you may find, on the following Sunday, its refuse and dirt still littering the streets and choking the gutters, blowing into your face, and filtering through the air on to your food, a very haven for flies and such as they. The

market is only one of the backsliders, the other . . . Well, if I had a municipal vote in St. Pol de Léon, I know how I should use it.

But nobody seems to mind—nobody grumbles at the refuse and the flies and the other “inconveniences.” They take them all in the spirit of fatalism which one observes throughout Brittany—the fatalism which keeps it poor, which makes it, as far as one can judge, the most drunken province in France, which kills, or appears to kill, initiative and progress and even “the will to do.” One works because one has to work—and it matters very little how one works or what at.

It is curious that Brittany should be, at the same time, so “religious.”

V

FATALISM is a dangerous atmosphere to breathe. It is not safe to cry Kismet, unless you are prepared to adjust the rest of your life to it.

When I spied the Englishman who, a few days previously, had given Kergosien his much-needed castigation, I ran to him with my congratulations. He was modest, surly even (as Englishmen are when they meet their fellow countrymen abroad), until by accident I mentioned the name of his school. It was the key to his confidence.

“Where are you off to now?” I asked him.

“England,” he replied. “I’ve no use for people who treat horses and Germans as if they weren’t also God’s creatures.”

“Hear, hear!” interposed Helen.

“And I’ve no use, either, for people who content themselves with the lowest standard of cleanliness and sanitation and then fancy themselves super-civilised.”

“Carried unanimously,” I exclaimed.

“Then you’re coming home too?” he queried

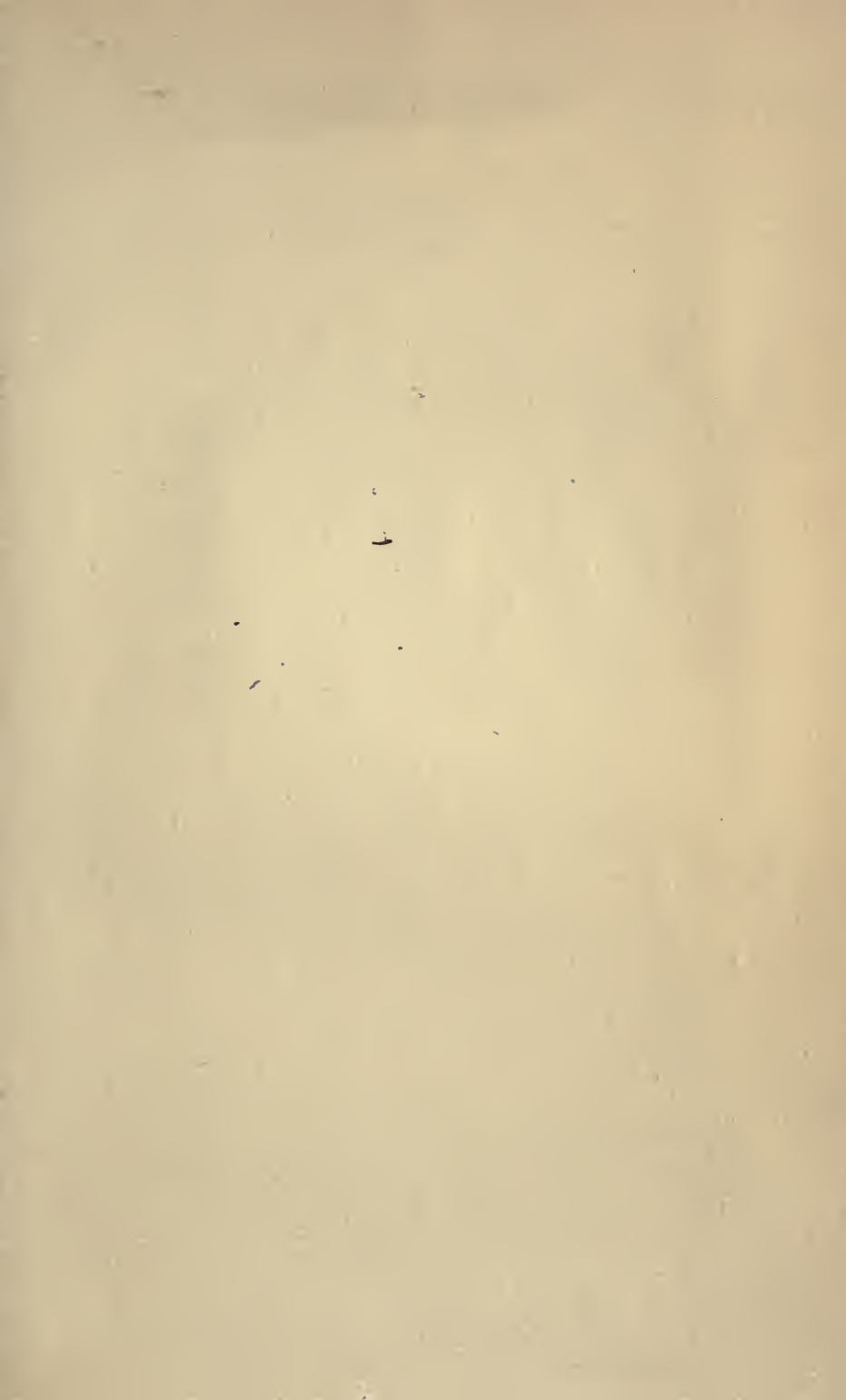
Up to that moment the idea hadn't occurred to us. It was Helen who answered.

"We came out here in the Spring, when the world's sap was rising. Now it is sinking again, and soon it will drop to the dead winter level. The sap of our enthusiasm for France is falling too. Let's go."

Helen had spoken——

"Kismet," I replied.

THE END



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